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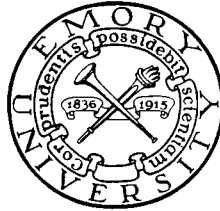
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THE EVE OF ST. MARK.

A ROMANCE OF VENICE.

BY

THOMAS DOUBLEDAY.

FOURTH EDITION.

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THE EVE OF ST. MARK.



CHAPTER I.

VENICE AS IT WAS IN 1590.

VENICE, although under the golden glow of an Italian sun·shine, or even under the colder gleam of the broad moon streaming silvery light from a deep, dark blue sky, it may be a gorgeous city, rising as it does like a *fata morgana* from the bosom of the Adriatic, is yet, during the rainy season, and especially at night, a wild and sometimes sombre-looking place. During this period, dank and heavy fogs will occasionally rest upon the head of the gulf of Venice, especially after sunset and in the dim gloom of the morning; and at such times, in the absence of the moon, even the practised gondolier by chance finds it difficult to thread his way through the obscurer and narrower portions of the maze of canals amid which the queen of maritime cities is built. Such views of Venice are not portrayed by painters nor by poets, nor often by travellers: Canaletti eschewed them, and Byron was shy of them; but they nevertheless sometimes occur, and will continue to do so whilst Venice stands where she does, and is what she is.

It was on one of these shadowy nights, when the Adriatic was enveloped in a thin dank mist, when the young moon vainly disputed for leave to shed her light through the masses of vaporous cloud that overcast the heavens, and when not a star could be observed to twinkle, that a young

man might have been observed by such wanderers as were ventured at that late hour upon the quays of Venice, rowing a light skiff, with an evidently weak arm, though with a practised hand, and with obvious bewilderment as to direction, along one of the narrow canals that intersected some of the less frequented portions of the sea-girt city.

By a Venetian eye, he would have been at once recognised as a foreigner ; his complexion and features arguing an origin other than Italian. His face, though too pale for a native of Italy, was expressive, and his features were manly and finely cut ; exhibiting, however, that placid calmness which is often indicative of finer qualities than are always possessed by those of more excitable temperament and great pretension of expression. His movements, had he been closely observed, would have sufficiently proved that he was a stranger to the city of Venice, and labouring under much indecision as to the course which he ought to take.

At length, after much hesitation, he seemed resolved to proceed no further in this state of incertitude as to his whereabouts, and observing through the gloom a flight of stone steps leading up to one of the quays on which the city stands, at the bottom of which were some iron mooring-rings, the young man quickly drew his skiff under the shadow of the wall, and wrapping himself in his cloak, was preparing to ascend the stair in order to reconnoitre his position when he suddenly paused on hearing the noise of more than one stealthy footfall, and the whispered voices of more than one man approaching the spot. Folding his cloak about him, and keeping beneath the dark shadow of the wall, with an oar in his grasp ready to push off his skiff at a moment's notice, into the middle of the canal, the young man silently waited the event, the nature of which did not remain long in uncertainty.

It became immediately evident that the narrow stair in question was to be used as a temporary concealment, by persons probably bent on some nefarious purpose. At first, the conversation was carried on in a tone so low, that the listener could only catch a few unintelligible syllables.

After a brief period had elapsed, however, the deep chimés of the clock of St. Mark were dimly heard to announce some intermediate portion of the hour; and this incident, together with the absence of any interruption, seemed to excite the whisperers to a less guarded interchange of converse.

"Do you hear, Pietro?" said the first speaker. "He may be here in twenty minutes."

"But are you sure he will pass this way?" was the hesitating reply of the person addressed.

"Fools who are on his sort of errand"—said a third interlocutor with a hoarse sneer—"generally choose the darkest road they can find!"

"And dark enough he shall find it," interjected the first speaker.

"How far are we from her house?" asked a fourth voice, in a low whisper.

"It stands about forty yards round the south angle of the islet"—replied the first voice.

"And where is his gondola?"

"At the northernmost landing," was the answer; "far enough out of hearing, if we manage our business like craftsmen——"

"Strange!" interjected the voice of the person who spoke second—"that a nobleman, who can command a principality, should risk his life for a painted strumpet, merely because she has white teeth and sings a bravura in a style that turns the addled brains of half the young puppies of Venice."

"Pshaw!" replied the third speaker, "diablo! what is that to thee? By San Antonio! if it were not for such painted popinjays, our trade would not be what it is. So let us mind our own business, which we understand, and not trouble our heads with others. Time flies; so get ready your tools my masters,—and mark! there must be no noise—not a cry nor a groan. Think of the reward, and be handy!"

A short pause followed these terribly significant words

At length a voice asked in a low whisper, "How, Master Calatrino, are we to dispose of him when *'tis* done?"

"Bah!" was the hoarse replication—"take him out towards the gulf; to the deep water yonder, beneath the black shadow of that old convent-prison; and I'll warrant he'll appear no more!"

"There have been other strange disappearances in that quarter," rejoined another speaker, "or Pietro must have fabled——"

"Nonsense! diablo! don't talk of such things now," replied Pietro, evidently disliking the reminiscence; and another pause followed.

In the meantime, as the youth listened, with curdling blood, and scarcely venturing to breathe, to the closing whispers of this horid intercommunication, he felt that no time was to be lost, if their destined victim was to be snatched from these remorseless assassins. He made up his mind at once to attempt at all risks to rescue him, whosoever he might be, whose life was evidently the object of the villains' pursuit. But how was this to be effected? Resistance to the attack of four bravoës, apprenticed and bred to their murderous craft, and as desperate as abandoned, seemed madness.

The youth himself was armed only with the slight sword worn as an undress by young men at this period; and his arm, debilitated by a wound only half healed, was too weak to use even a weapon like this to any purpose, against a determined assault of superior numbers. The destined victim might be in no better plight than he was to stand such an onset; and in case of failure, both their lives were forfeit. But irresolution under danger was no part of his nature, and his determination was soon taken.

Keeping close under the shadow of the quay wall, and cautiously and noiselessly moving his skiff forward, he gained, in a few minutes, the angle of the quay, and got round it without giving any alarm. He was now out of sight and hearing of the bravoës; and pushing his skiff, as he conjectured, nearly opposite the house whence the in-

tended victim was to emerge, he carefully moored her under the quay, and easily managed to ascend the wall under which she was ; with a determination to warn the person who should appear (whoever he might be) of his peril, and, if disregarded, follow him and abide the issue. Wrapping himself therefore in his cloak, he crouched down close to the parapet, to avoid observation, and awaited the event.

His detention in this anxious position was not really long, although the minutes seemed to lag as they crept on. The night had become very dark ; nor in any of the tall mansions in front of which he was did any one seem to be stirring. A dim light in one or two of the distant and highest casements was all that was to be seen ; and the dull melancholy slopping of the ruffled waters against the quays was alone heard.

At length the great clock of St. Mark was distinctly heard through the thick atmosphere to strike the hour of three ; and in a few minutes the youth noted the passing gleam of a light through one of the casements opposite the spot where he had stationed himself. In a few seconds more, the door of the house was opened, and a cavalier silently left the mansion.

The moment was now arrived when the young man was to act, and when the utmost prudence and caution were requisite to allow his interference to be of use. He accordingly rose from the spot where he had stationed himself, and advancing within a couple of paces of the cavalier, said, in as calm and quiet a tone as he could manage to assume — “A single word with you, if you please, signor.”

On hearing himself addressed, the cavalier, who had not before been aware of the stranger’s proximity, started ; and putting his hand to the hilt of his rapier, half drew it ; at the same time gathering his cloak round his left arm, so as to parry an assault.

“First say who are you that thus dare abruptly accost me ?” replied the cavalier.

“Hush ! signor : a friend, be assured !” was the calm rejoinder of the young interlocutor, who, by a significant action,

took care to apprise the person addressed, that his hands were unoccupied with any weapon.

"A friend, sir, should have a name," returned the cavalier in a suppressed tone: "I must know yours before you approach nearer." And, suiting the action to the word, he unsheathed his rapier and stood prepared for offence or defence.

"My name is Raymond Delancy," replied the young man; "the name of no ungentle blood, whatever yours may be. But we are wasting time, signor. Your life is in danger; and I would preserve it, if you let me do so."

The cavalier was evidently re-assured by the matter and manner of the youth's reply. "If you say sooth, young signor," he said, "I ought to trust you: but first know that I am not one who shrinks from danger, nor one who would lose the opportunity to punish aggression, if intended."

"Where courage is hopeless," calmly replied the young man, "it becomes madness. Be guided by me, and the intended victim may become his own avenger. But, in any case, there is not a moment to lose. *That* is the first consideration."

"I will trust you, young sir," was the answer of the cavalier.

"Then follow me in silence," rejoined the youth; "but first say, for I am a stranger in Venice, is this islet connected by a bridge with any other?"

"It is, by a single bridge, near its farthest extremity," whispered the cavalier.

"Where is your gondola, signor?" whispered the young man, in return.

"Under the arch of that bridge," replied the cavalier.

"Are your gondoliers armed?" asked the young interrogator.

"They are," answered the cavalier.

"Buono! signor; follow me then," whispered the youth; and, stepping to the parapet, he gently let himself down into the skiff, motioning to his companion to follow; which he readily and adroitly did.

Putting his finger on his lips, the youth pushed off, and taking the opposite side of the canal, silently and slowly proceeded back again, passing the stair where the ruffians were awaiting their victim, but on the other side of the narrow canal.

Favoured by the thick murkiness of the atmosphere, and by the ripple of the waters, which were now a little ruffled by a transient breeze, the skiff passed without observation, and, after a space, the voyagers found themselves near the bridge, indicated by the cavalier as the place where his gondola was moored.

Before reaching this spot, the youth, however, had observed a boat fastened at an angle of the quay, on the side formed by the islet in question. This boat he adroitly unmoored, and, fastening her to the stern of his skiff, towed her to the bridge indicated by his companion, who now began to comprehend the peril which had environed him. On reaching the bridge, beneath which lay the gondola of which they were in search, the young Delancy—for such was his name—addressed the other thus:—

“Now, signor, thanks to God and the Virgin Mother, you are safe. If your gondoliers are armed, we can, if necessary, keep the passage of the bridge; and the villains who seek your life have no other ready avenue of escape. How far hence is the nearest station whence some armed assistance might be obtained?”

“It is only a few minutes’ voyage from this place to the arsenal,” was the reply of the cavalier; and making a low signal, he was quickly joined by a youth, richly dressed as a page, who was evidently astonished at seeing his master thus accompanied.

Taking out his tablets, the stranger rapidly wrote something upon one of the leaves, and taking a signet-ring from his finger, gave it to the page, who received it with a low obeisance.

“Marco,” said the cavalier, “you are no bad gondolier. Take the oars of this gentleman, row to the arsenal, with all haste, and show these to the officer in command for the night.

Let no time be lost in obeying these directions, and wait there until I join you ; but, mark me, avoid conversation with any one as to what is passing. Before you go, tell the gondoliers to light their torch, and attend this gentleman and myself."

These orders were obeyed, as they were given, promptly : and, in a few minutes, the bridge was guarded by two gondoliers, who were well armed, aided by the cavalier and his young companion, who wore the side-arms customary at that period.

After the silent suspense of about half-an-hour, the noise of oars was distinctly heard, and a row-boat with an officer and a few soldiers from the arsenal were quickly on the spot. Beckoning the officer in command, the cavalier, in a low tone, gave him some directions what to do ; and motioning his young companion to enter the gondola, he and his gondoliers silently followed. A few minutes' rowing brought them to the arsenal of the Republic.

On their landing at the arsenal, the young Englishman—for such was his nation—could not but remark that his companion was received by the officer on guard with the respect and deference only shown to personages of high consequence in the Republic.

They were shown into a room tolerably well lighted, in which was a table of some length, covered with rich embossed leather, and well furnished with materials for writing. The chandeliers were of that lucid cut glass for which Venice was then and long afterwards famous ; and chairs of a rich and quaint manufacture, each bearing blazoned on its high and carved back the arms of the Republic of Venice, were ranged round the table ; those at each end being raised a few inches upon a low dais or platform. The floor was covered by a thick and richly woven matting, and the walls with carved panels of some dark wood.

Such was the apartment into which they were ushered, when the cavalier, having conversed for a few minutes in a low tone with the officer in attendance, said, addressing his companion,—

"Young signor, be pleased to follow this gentleman; he will provide you with such refreshment as the place and the hour happen to afford. A soldier is in such cases easily contented; and as soon as I shall have inquired into this dark business, I shall rejoin you."

The young man obeyed this recommendation, very willingly, of course, and was shown by the officer into what was evidently a guard-room, where a small flagon of the ordinary wine drank by the soldiery, some dried fruits, a few olives, and some coarse rusk biscuits, such as were supplied to the galleys, were speedily set before him, and he was left to enjoy his fare "with what appetite he might."

This requisite a good many hours' exposure to the raw night-breezes of the Adriatic had amply supplied; and the wine and fruit soon grew less under the frequent applications made by the youth to both; after which, stretching his wearied limbs upon one of the benches, he reclined to ruminate at ease on the singular adventures of the night.

That, under such circumstances, sleep should, after a while, steal upon his tired eyelids, was not surprising. It in fact soon overtook him, and he reposed undisturbed for some length of time, until he was at last awakened by the entrance of the cavalier, his companion; who, having hastily helped himself to some food and such wine as remained, thus addressed his young guest—

"Young signor," said the cavalier, "I need not inform you that you have, in all human probability, been the preserver of my life,—a service, I fear, I shall never have it in my power adequately to repay; and yet I am now to ask an additional favour at your hands."

The young man bowed, without replying.

"The boon I ask of you," continued the cavalier, "is, that you will for the present keep this adventure profoundly secret. Reasons of state render it highly necessary, as well as expedient, that no word of aught that has happened to-night should be divulged."

"You shall be obeyed, sir, and strictly obeyed, as far as I am concerned," replied the young man.

"Of that I do not doubt," rejoined the cavalier courteously ; "and now let me turn to another portion of the subject, both pleasanter to the feeling and more interesting, to him, at least, who now addresses you. You have saved, my dear young signor, the life of one who to the willingness adds much of the power to serve you, as far as one of your lineage and country may be served in this state of Venice ; which is, as I believe you partly know, jealous to an extreme in the distribution of its favours."

The young Englishman almost started with surprise, and answered with some little agitation in his manner, "You are aware, then, signor, of what country I come?"

"I am so," rejoined the cavalier, smiling courteously at the surprise of the young soldier. "I am well aware that I am now addressing the son of the illustrious English Baron Delancy ; a nobleman whose claims to distinction are evidenced in his being at this moment admiral of a Venetian fleet cruising against the Infidel."

"You say sooth, signor," rejoined the youth. "But this being so, as it is, may I not hope that the august Republic, which has so preferred the father, may not disdain the son?"

"Excuse me, signor," replied the cavalier blandly, "but, in this instance, the word disdain has no application, and is therefore out of place. It is not applicable to any scion of the noble house of Delancy ; a race *sans peur et sans reproche*, which, to borrow the phrase of another great Englishman, your famous Northumbrian Percy, have, at all hazards, and at all sacrifices, saved intact 'the bird in their breast,' and are therefore only made more illustrious by misfortune. Were this all, young sir, my way and yours also would be easy. But, unfortunately, this is not all, and there are those in Venice who will fear you as an Englishman more than they respect you as a man."

"Do I interpret your words aright, signor?" asked the young man, with increasing wonder painted on his usually calm countenance. "Can it be possible that the great Republic of Venice, the mistress of the seas, the emporium of commerce, and right-arm of Christendom, can entertain

aught of fear for a nation yet young in adventure, whose navies old Ocean hardly knows, and whose arms, however great once, are now, alas! more likely to be turned against herself in civil broil, than used to endanger the safety of others? Methinks the power that sent Christopher Colon to discover a new Indies in the west, or that other that, more recently, has despatched Vasco de Gama to the East, were more likely to trouble the peace of the Venetian Republic."

As the youth said this with some degree of excitement, his companion looked him fixedly in the face, and quietly replied, "You speak as is natural to your years, young signor; but our Venetian rulers look farther into the future. The lazy Spaniard, prosperity will only enervate. The Portugal has rent asunder the parent tree, and weakened the stem without benefit to the dissevered branch. The Republic fears them not: but in England we see a young eaglet, which we know better than to despise because it is young. In the English we recognise a race born to face the storms, daring in danger, reckless of others, and (pardon me for saying so) unscrupulous as to the means, when the object to be acquired is great; deeming nothing impossible when the guerdon is worth the struggle. In such a race, Venice cannot but see a rival,—perhaps a successor. Forgive me, young sir, if I speak too plainly; but such is the truth."

The young man paused, as if embarrassed for a moment as to what to reply, but at length went on,—

"It cannot be unknown to you, signor, that, although English by birth, I am, alas! not an Englishman. Yet, outcast as I am, an exile from my paternal halls, perchance never to return, I cannot but feel pride in knowing that, torn with factions as she is, and with hardly an ally, England can yet be feared by this mighty Republic. 'Tis, however, a vain pride; nor need the rulers of Venice look on a humble stranger like me with averted eyes; for whether my country be doomed to weal or to woe, I cannot either further her greatness or contribute to her decline."

As the young man spoke, his voice faltered, and a tear started in his eye, which he hastily brushed away.

"Dear young signor," interposed his companion kindly, "you put (excuse me for saying so) a stress upon my expressions which they were not intended to bear. Amongst the many powerful parties arising out of our singular form of government, there are many opinions; and to some the name of Englishman is a passport, whilst with others it is the reverse. There are, too, in Venice," continued the cavalier, smiling as he spoke, "those who have influence in the state without possessing ostensibly the appearance of rule. And, unless rumour lies, there be fair eyes in Venice by whom an Englishman is viewed with anything but disfavour!"

The youth blushed visibly, on hearing this last remark, and answered with some hesitation, "To whom your observation may point, signor, you of course best know, but I must protest my own ignorance of the object of your allusion."

"Nay, nay, young sir," rejoined the cavalier, "trust me, there is no need of disclaimers. This may be no more than the gossip of the piazzas,—the scandal of the quays,—the tittle-tattle of pages and dames d'honneur. All I meant to convey was, that, supposing it for a moment to be true, there is nothing in such a supposition that either party need blush to own. But as for the envy, the rancour, the jealousy, the disappointed ambition, and baffled aspirations involved in such a supposition, that is, indeed, another matter."

"I must not, signor, profess to understand you," said the youth in some amazement, and not a little confusion, neither of which he could hide; "you speak in riddles."

"All I wish to impress is, and, believe me, I say it as a friend, that he who rises suddenly, however worthily, in Venice, must look for suspicion, jealousy, resentment, and malice, to attend his steps. With these, and worse than these, he has to deal; for there be, I sorrow to say it, intriguers in this our state, who will resort to any means, however unhallowed, however forbidden by the laws of God and man, to circumvent, entrap, entangle, and destroy. To you, young signor, a stranger in the state, these things may be unknown. But it is fit you know them, and therefore, as a friend, do I warn you of them."

"And now," said the cavalier, taking the hand of the young Englishman, who was totally unable to conceal his surprise at this strange address, "I must leave you, having said thus much. You will, I know, wonder, that he of whom you have been the preserver should quit you, and yet leave you in ignorance of his name and quality. But you know not the precautions necessary here. For the present, no word must transpire, even to yourself, which might throw the slightest light on the transactions of this night. After a brief period, however, you shall hear from me. Till then, be silent,—be cautious; and may God's holy Mother be your guide and protectress. Adieu!"

With these words, the cavalier bowed courteously to his companion, and withdrew, leaving the young soldier dumb in astonishment, and bewildered with the strange events in which he had become so suddenly and singularly involved. From this state he was only roused by the entrance of an official, who courteously apprized him that a government row-boat was ready to convey him to any quarter of the city to which he should direct himself to be taken.



CHAPTER II.

THE WOLF AND THE FOX.

It was on the close of a summer's eve, some few weeks after the events just narrated, when two men might have been observed sitting in close and apparently deeply interesting converse in the alcoved window of a stately house in the city of Venice. In appearance, they were very different. One richly dressed, and with the air and manner of one of the magnates of the Republic, then in the autumn of her power, seemed to be a man of middle age, and with those strongly lined features which bespeak a mind worn with political intrigue and civil struggles. It was one of those countenances which puzzle mankind to decipher, solely be-

cause, beyond a general thoughtful cunning, so great is the habitual command of expression, that beyond a hard sagacity, nothing is to be discerned. It bore the impress of a politic perseverance, but its dark features would give token of nothing more. The companion of this personage was an ecclesiastic. His plain garments and placid manner, evidently assumed, harmonized ill with his features, and with the occasional play of those features. He seemed somewhat younger than his companion. His face was one of those of which the general effect is to give the idea of much voluptuousness and self-indulgence, masked by much cunning and a habitual reserve, not always quite successful in its object. With an eye of lighter hue, and smaller than those commonly seen in the Italian face, the lower portion of that face was fleshy and full, whilst the forehead was bony and narrow. His cheek occasionally showed that flush which argues a mind ill at ease, and sometimes stirred by ill-suppressed passions; whilst his air was elaborately placid, and his language always carefully chosen, was sometimes tinged with a quiet sarcasm, in which such men venture to indulge. It was a glorious sunset: one of those lovely and splendid but short-lived visions of departing day, which in southern climes are so briefly but brightly tranquil. The last rays of the sun glittered on the lagune, amidst the wavelets of which the queen of maritime cities stands. They were brightly reflected on the roofs and windows of the city; and as, here and there, a dusky gondola was seen oaring its course, it might be painted by the imagination of a poet as some portion of an unbred pomp now collecting to celebrate the obsequies of the departing day, so darkly did it contrast with the still radiant waters amidst which it glided. As the sun sank below the horizon, a short silence interrupted a converse till then unremittingly continued though in low tones. The sun at last became invisible, lights were introduced into the room; but still the two interlocutors continued at the window, apparently in the enjoyment of the cool refreshing air that evening breathed from the Adriatic. At length the elder renewed the colloquy which for a short period had slumbered—

"And so you say the countess is as mysterious as ever?" began the nobleman.

"My words hardly imported that, signor," answered the ecclesiastic, with a marked emphasis on the last monosyllable.

"Indeed? Well! I think I can comprehend the allusion," rejoined the other.

"The Signor Bembo has comprehended many difficulties greater than that," was the reply.

"Perhaps so;" rejoined the noble with an affected carelessness; "you point at the young Englishman—your new foreign connexion: say I not sooth?"

Father Momora, for such was the name of the priest, made no reply in words. His silence was not, however, devoid of meaning; and all the more so, because a studied forbearance of expression on the features of the face left his silence full room to reveal its own meaning.

Bembo paused for a moment, and then quietly remarked,—

"Can it be possible that a lady of the Countess Luchesi's sense of dignity should stoop to a passion so ridiculous? I cannot—and for my part, will not believe it."

"You are doubtless the best judge, signor," said the priest.

"To fall in love with an awkward, icy, islander, hardly half her own age!" muttered the noble; "I tell you, father, the idea is ridiculous."

"Youth is not always a preventive of love," was the sarcastic reply of the ecclesiastic, "especially if youth, as is often the case, happens to be handsome."

"Handsome!" echoed the noble, bitterly. "The beauty of a statue, of a marble mask,"—

"Precisely so, signor."

"Besides," went on the other, apparently not attending to the remark of the priest, "the utter want of likelihood that this stripling lump of ice should be brought to make any return."

"Ambition has done stranger things," gravely remarked the priest. "You, Signor Bembo, at all events will not deny that the countess has attractions."

The noble bit his lip for a moment, but made no reply to this remark of the father.

"And then his foreign origin," remarked Bembo, "as well as frozen exterior, both distasteful to Italian natures; and the utter lack of probability that he, a young foreigner of a nation proverbially enterprising, should settle down here, the husband of a lady who, however beautiful, and however wealthy, is hardly likely to fix on one so far her junior."

"These circumstances, signor, may tell in more directions than one," quietly remarked the ecclesiastic.

"As how?" asked the senator, betraying some little alarm at the evident bias of the padre.

"I only say what occurs to my own mind, nothing more," explained the padre.

"Say on," drily added the magnifico.

"Your excellence is of course aware," said the priest, crossing himself as he spoke, "of the unhappy position of England, the native country of this noble family."

"Of course, if you mean the religious position," was the reply.

"Doubtless," said the priest. "Well! then, your excellency need not be told how deeply tainted is that unhappy realm with the accursed Lutheran heresy, or of the persecutions that rage against such especially of any mark, that adhere to the faith as taught by our holy church."

The senator bowed assent, and the padre proceeded.

"Of these few faithful in the worst of times, probably your excellency knows, is the Baron Delancy, the father of this youth, now in the service of the Republic."

"Unquestionably; or how should he be there?" replied the noble.

"Just so," rejoined the priest. "What motive can such a man, who, by his bravery and services against the Ottoman, is earning both praise and guerdon from the august Council of Ten,—what motive, I say, can such a man have to return to a country which persecutes his faith and spurns his services?"

"What more likely than that he should become a denizen

of a maritime republic, whose service is also especially suited to the habits of his amphibious race?" quietly added the priest, who had now succeeded in alarming Bembo.

"Go on," said the magnifico, uneasily.

"Besides, the health of his lady, the baroness, seems to require continued residence in a milder and yet more bracing climate. The fortunate youth, too," sarcastically remarked the priest, "who, it must be confessed, hardly seems aware of the conquests he may possibly make, is still a half valetudinarian, from that hurt he got from the Turks off Scio,—all which circumstances unquestionably conspire to point in one direction."

"Pshaw!" said the noble impatiently; "and do you really mean me, father, to dread this well-cut lump of English ice, for he is no better?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the priest; "but too much confidence is as bad as too much caution, nor must we trust too much to appearances. I know something of these cold but self-willed islanders; and I know that under the ice of their coldness, hotter currents may oft-times be met with."

The nobleman rose and strode across the room.

A silence of some minutes ensued, during which the priest appeared to sit meekly and submissively, as waiting the pleasure of his superior before he again ventured to speak. In the meantime, the senator had again seated himself, and remained ruminating with knitted brows.

"The father is a brave soldier," at length he remarked, "but proud, like the rest of his race."

The priest raised his head, but said nothing.

"The baroness-mother, too, is full of the prejudices of her country, and seems alone to be kept alive by her dotage as to this stripling—whom, though a good catholic enough I dare say, she goes far to deify."

"I do not exactly see your excellency's inference," said the padre, with an air of assumed simplicity.

The nobleman again bit his lip. "I mean, that even supposing the stripling to have any such views, their consent is at least doubtful," said the senator, slightly embarrassed.

"Of that I cannot pretend to judge," replied the priest, in the same tone of entire simplicity.

Bembo again rose and strode once or twice across the room; when suddenly reseating himself, he fixed his eye full upon the face of the ecclesiastic, and said in a suppressed tone,—

"Padre, I shall be plain with you."

"Your excellency may safely be so," replied the priest, meekly.

"I shall be so, at all events. You wish me to believe, father, that this stripling is likely to prove an obstacle in my path," said the magnifico sternly.

"I have merely narrated facts and circumstances. It is for your excellency to judge," was the cautious reply of the priest.

The nobleman again rose and strode across the apartment.

"I *will* judge," he at length muttered; "and what is more, I will act upon the judgment."

"Father," said he, seating himself with the resolved air of a man who has made up his mind to some decisive act, "without putting more upon your words than they will bear, it is not difficult to see whither they lead. Be it so: I have trusted you before, and I shall trust you again."

"Your excellency has no cause, I hope, to regret such confidence," was the reply of the priest.

"Certainly no," said the noble; "nor shall you repent, father, of any services which you have done, or yet may do for me. Of this then be assured, if an obstacle does oppose itself to my path, it shall by some means or other"—and here the speaker dropped his voice and looked sternly in the face of his listener—"be removed."

Hardly had the last words fallen from the lips of Bembo, when a heavy toll from the great bell of St. Mark came so distinctly and suddenly upon the ear, that the priest absolutely started and gazed out into the gloom, which was now as dark as midnight. The breeze from the Adriatic, bringing upon its wings the distant and hoarse voices of the crowds which some public occasion had congregated in the great square of St. Mark,

breathed briskly upon the face of the ecclesiastic as he peered out from the open casement. Here and there a dim and distant light showed that men were still stirring in the remoter parts of the city. As the priest gazed, the sky was suddenly illuminated with one of those intensely brilliant and rapid lightnings which seem to fringe for a moment the clouds, and to form a zig-zag arch across the whole cope of the sky ; betokening in these climates some sudden perturbation of the atmosphere. Another and somewhat stronger breath of air streamed in, whilst a toll, more profound and stronger than before, seemed to shake the lattice of the casement. Involuntarily, and with a sudden action, closing the lattice, the padre arose, and with a profound obeisance to the senator, left the apartment.

The senator, now alone, paced up and down the apartment, so apparently wrapt in deep thought as almost to start from his profound reverie, when a courier was introduced into the stately chamber with a missive for the hand of its owner. It bore the seal of the Spinelli family, and was an invitation or rather summons from the Marquis of that name, inviting or rather requiring his presence at an early day, on secret business relating to the state. As Bembo perused the writing, although, to ordinary observers, nothing indicative of his feelings was apparent in his countenance or manner, yet to those who watched him narrowly, some uneasiness might have been visible.

“ His excellency, the marquis, is well, I trust,” politely inquired the senator of the messenger.

“ Perfectly so, signor.”

Bembo, without holding further converse, summoned his secretary, and putting the messenger of the marquis under his care, with instructions to signify his compliance with the summons, retired, in appearance busied with more varied abstractions than before.

The senator's solitude was not, however, destined to be of lengthened duration. He had retired, and was there seated, wrapt in meditation, when father Momoro was again announced.

"From the Countess Luchesini, signor," said the father attempting some apology for the apparent interruption, and delivering at the same time a sealed note.

The senator rapidly read the note, which expressed, in guarded terms of courtesy, the writer's wish to be favoured with an interview early on the following day. As he perused the billet, the priest watched narrowly the indications of his countenance, but with little result. They evinced only the mental action of a man who rapidly revolves a variety of topics in his own mind before he addresses another.

"You are aware of the import of this note, I believe, father," said the senator.

The padre signified acquiescence.

"So fair a lady's commands are in all cases absolute," gallantly responded the magnifico.

The priest slightly smiled; one of those ambiguous smiles that may mean very little, or a good deal more.

"Say to your lady, I shall await her commands at the hour she is so good as to mention, without any fail," said the senator; "and now, as it grows late, father, good night!" politely added the noble, dismissing his guest with a studied courtesy.

"So, then," said Bembo, mentally, again slowly striding across the floor when he felt himself alone, "she has need of my services in some fashion, at all events. Good: 'tis well."



CHAPTER III.

THE VILLA SPINELLI.

WITHIN forty-eight hours after the foregoing conversation, and towards the evening of an autumnal day, when the shadows begin to extend themselves along the ground, might have been observed, in a retired garden of the Villa Spinelli, three persons, apparently of high rank, engaged in close and deep conversation.

The garden to which they had retired to carry on this con-

ference had been laid out by its noble owner, who was also one of the celebrated Council of Ten, in great part for purposes of this nature. It was surrounded by lofty walls, against which were placed some choice fruit-trees ; one entire side of the quadrangle being occupied by a conservatory filled with the finest and rarest tropical exotics. A broad walk went round the whole, bordered by flower-beds carefully laid out. In the midst was a large marble fountain, the constant sound of limpid waters beguiling the sense of heat.

This fountain was encircled by a shrubbery, principally of myrtle, through which ran broad and wending but shady walks, some leading to the flowery margin of the lucid water, and others ending in shady arbours, in which were marble seats—these chosen resting-places being surrounded by fragrant flowery shrubs, and sheltered by a dense foliage overhead impervious to the fiercest sun. The access to this sequestered spot was by a single door furnished with a spring-lock, of which the noble owner of the beautiful villa always carried a key, by leaving which in the lock, when locked from the inside, all possible intrusion was prevented. The great height of the walls on three sides precluded the possibility of any conversation, however loud, which might be carried on in the centre of the planted portion of this retreat, being overheard by the keenest ear ; so that here secret affairs of the greatest moment to the state might be discussed as safely as in the dread council-chamber of the Ten.

Upon one of the marble seats near the fountain, in the midst of this political retreat, the three persons alluded to had spread their cloaks, and were reclining, whilst carrying on a discourse of some moment, as it should seem, to all three. The eldest of these persons was an ecclesiastic of the highest rank. His face was deeply furrowed with wrinkles, and his countenance wore that air of severity which the trying circumstances of the times in some measure forced upon dignified ecclesiastics, with whom the powers of government were commingled with duties merely spiritual. The spirit of the Protestant Reformation, which, beginning in Germany, had spread over England, Sweden, Denmark, parts of France, and por-

tions of the Low Countries, was exciting, in Catholic states, the deepest uneasiness, as well as the most violent passions.

The progress of the Mahometan faith and of the Ottoman arms, on the other hand, was beginning to shake the hearts of all Christendom; and whilst this was acting upon the minds of the Venetian rulers, other peculiar circumstances connected with the Venetian state were adding to the general alarm, which both the religious and political position of Europe naturally created. All these concurrent circumstances combined to imbitter both the hearts and visages of men deeply engaged in affairs of the church and of the state; and this was now apparent in the bearing and features of the aged but still energetic and subtle churchman with whom the Marquis Spinelli and the senator Bembo were holding colloquy. Their converse was carried on in a measured and for the most part subdued tone. The natural fire of the Italian, when engaged in verbal controversy, was evidently softened by the gravity and painfulness of the affair to be discussed; whilst towards the aged ecclesiastic a studied deference was exhibited by his two companions, which he appeared to consider merely as his due.

“It must, on consideration, I take leave to assume,” went on the senator Bembo, whose deep interest in the event of the interview even his customary air of unmoved gravity could not wholly conceal,—“It must, on reflection, I think, be apparent to your eminence,” continued the senator, “that there never was a time when the sources of our intelligence ought to be more delicately guarded than now.”

“I am of that opinion too,” added the marquis, leaning a little to Bembo.

The cardinal (for such was his rank) signified a tacit assent, but very coldly.

“Your eminence must be well aware,” continued the senator, somewhat deepening his tone, “that besides the general danger from Turkish aggression, now fearfully menacing the vineyard of Christ, and which Venice, as the chiefest maritime state in Christendom, is both by duty and political dictates imperatively called upon to watch and ward

as far as she may, there exist other perils of a more peaceful but more insidious, and, therefore, of a more dangerous nature; against which it behoves us to guard by every possible method, and with all possible secrecy and promptitude."

"To what in particular does the senator allude?" asked the ecclesiastic.

"To the schemes of the Portuguese, and their audacious enterprises to endeavour to discover a road by sea to the Indies; of which your eminence is not ignorant," deferentially replied Bembo.

"Man plans, but God executes," was the answer of the ecclesiastic. "Who shall sound the depths of His ocean, or count the grains of sand upon the shore? Who, in short, shall measure that which Infinitude has decreed shall be by man unmeasurable? Vasco de Gama," solemnly added the churchman, after a pause, "will never return."

"Holy Mary! grant that the words of your eminence may be prophetic!" ejaculated the marquis; "but Christopher Colon returned!"

"God will do His will. We must do our duty," was the stern response of the cardinal.

"In human affairs, I need not remind your eminence, we must use human means," quietly rejoined Bembo. "Where the end is holy, although the instruments be bad (as which of us is perfect?" he added, reverentially crossing himself), "human weakness constrains us to use such: always under sanction, of course," he reverentially added, "of God and His holy Church."

"It is the duty of the Church," rejoined the ecclesiastic, addressing himself to Signor Bembo, "to see that use shall not merge in abuse, or how shall man profit thereby?"

"To all that your eminence says as a dignified minister of our holy Church," submissively returned the senator, "I of course deferentially bow."

"I am glad to hear it, my son," replied the churchman.

"But in her judgments," argued the senator, "the Church herself, having fallible men to deal with, must weigh circumstances and consider events. Now, what is the present

position, humanly speaking, of the Republic of Venice relatively to foreign and rival states—some of them cold friends, and some fiery enemies to our holy religion? Portugal, envious of our commercial empire, is by every device and at every cost trying how best to undermine. France, that scandal to Christendom, has shaken the hand of fellowship with the infidel, and looks askance on the firmest defender of the faith. But, what is of the deepest import of all, the armies of the Ottoman, encouraged by our unchristian divisions, and helped forward by evil influence of national backsliding, press upon our dominions in the Morea, and threaten the road to the Indies that God has opened out for the Republic. It was only by a special providence approaching the miraculous, by the extraordinary nature of our intelligence as to the designs of the Grand Turk and his vizier, and by the prompt and almost superhuman daring of a foreign admiral, that Candia the other day was saved from the grasp of Islamism. Under circumstances so urgent, your eminence can hardly fail to see that the sources of our intelligence must not be examined too closely. In ordinary times ordinary maxims prevail: in extreme cases the wisest leeches resort to the extremest remedies.”

Upon the Marquis Spinelli this astute appeal produced its full effect. Not so upon the churchman; whose ear, it was apparent, the speaker most anxiously wished to gain.

The ecclesiastic, pausing for a few seconds, mildly but authoritatively said:—“Signor Bembo, the ingenuity of your logic is equal to the gravity of the cause you take in hand. I cannot, however, yield to it. Where a sacred duty is plainly prescribed, we must perform it, and leave the event to the great Disposer of all.”

“There can be no doubt of the abstract truth of the position of your eminence,” observed the marquis, evidently overawed by the unbending pertinacity of the cardinal. “but—but—”

“But,” quickly interposed the senator, “he who governs the event does not forbid—nay, He commands—to His creatures the use of means. Now all means employed by man must be human means.”

A deep scowl here overspread the countenance of the priest. "Does the dark Spirit of evil, think ye, my children, never mingle himself with the grosser counsels of our sinful flesh?" sternly inquired the cardinal.

Bembo bit his lip and was silent. He had, politician as he was, unwarily ventured upon dangerous ground. Spinelli interposed.

"Unquestionably, your eminence!" rejoined the marquis. "Holy Mary! shield us from doubting that!"

"Amen!" responded the cardinal; "and we have this warning vouchsafed for our worldly salvation in such cases," continued the priest, pursuing his advantage—"He who seeks knowledge through forbidden agents, shall be, in the end, their victim, and not their scholar."

The deep silence of a minute, that followed this enunciation, showed that neither of the interlocutors deemed any reply politic or advisable. The cardinal proceeded:—

"Thus, therefore, there are or may be circumstances under which duty, especially to the State as well as to the Church, becomes imperative, without reference to temporal consequences of an immediate nature. This, I trust, signors, you admit."

The marquis and the senator bowed acquiescence; the ecclesiastic doggedly went on:—

"In any inquiry which I may feel it my duty to put to your excellency, I hope I need not say that my motives are purely of a public kind, and untinged with aught not in accordance with perfect friendliness and Christian love and charity?"

"Your eminence I know to be incapable of any meaner motive," answered Bembo gravely; for he was the person addressed.

"I am flattered by your good opinion," replied the ecclesiastic courteously. "And I may further add, that I am well convinced that Signor Bembo's well-known consideration in the choice of those whom he honours with his friendship or his intimacy, must render any inquiry which concerns them, in one sense, indifferent to him."

"The courtesy with which your eminence knows how to make such an enquiry renders all the rest easy and pleasant," said the senator, with apparent unconcern.

"The Senator Bembo," blandly rejoined the aged ecclesiastic, "seems to know so well how to impart the same feeling to those whom he addresses, that I feel the less hesitation in asking him whether he does not include in the list of those whom he honours with his friendship the Countess Luchesini?"

"The Countess Luchesini!" repeated the senator, apparently with the air of a man who feels some surprise at the direction of a question, without any uneasiness as to its import—"oh! certainly."

"And may I ask," sedately inquired the questioner, "the duration of that intimacy?"

"Surely—undoubtedly," rejoined Bembo. "As my recollection serves me—three, or peradventure four years."

"Then your knowledge of the countess dates no further back than the period named?" pointedly answered the questioner.

"Undoubtedly not—my personal acquaintance certainly not," replied the senator decisively. "By reputation I may have known the lady longer."

"What know you of her early history?" asked the ecclesiastic; "for it is that I could wish to inquire? I have heard that it is singular," he added frankly.

"Of that I cannot pretend to speak," replied Bembo, with an air of indifference. "In fact, my knowledge of the countess's earlier life, if knowledge it can be called, is derived from mere hearsay, or from casual allusions of her own."

The cardinal paused and glanced at Spinelli, who all this time had maintained a careless sort of silence, but at length went on:—

"I have heard her birth was obscure," he remarked in a low tone.

"As to that, I can only speak from casual expressions dropped by herself," replied the senator. "As far as poverty could make it so, I believe it was. Her family, however, were once not without possessions, nor devoid of noble

kindred; but the vicissitudes of Italian faction destroyed the one, and rendered the other perhaps worse than valueless. Of these particulars, however, I must remind your eminence. I have no knowledge save from the source I have indicated."

The cardinal nodded, and again relapsed into silence.

"The tongue of common fame," remarked the marquis, with the air of a man who feels he does not risk hurting any feeling of himself or others by his expressions, "would have us believe that she became a part of the late senator Luchesini's household in very early life, and occupied a very dependent situation."

"Such is the common belief, and such is mine," remarked Bembo, with an air of great candour. "That her conduct, however, in that dependence must have been exemplary we have the best of proofs."

"As how, signor?" quietly asked the cardinal.

"In the fact," replied the senator, "of her having become at last the wife of her early patron, the confidential partner of his declining age, and the heiress of the possessions and wealth of the opulent and noble house of Luchesini. And to the entire confidence," added Bembo after a short pause, "which that most cautious and skilled of statist and politicians, the Count and Senator Luchesini, reposed in her, we may doubtless attribute the power she has inherited of rendering political service to the state."

The ecclesiastic made no immediate reply, but seemed revolving something in his own mind.

"The Count Luchesini was a skilful politician," he at length remarked, "but not a very scrupulous one."

"Few politicians are so," drily rejoined Bembo.

"He held that, in urgent cases, the end justified the means; a maxim perilous in the extreme when applied to temporal matters, and, in any, the seldomer acted upon the better," thoughtfully added the cardinal.

To this no answer was made by the other interlocutors. The cardinal again paused, as in deep communion with his own thoughts. He at length resumed:—

"Does your excellency"—addressing himself to Bembo—

"happen to know whether any of the agents in the confidence of the late count and senator yet remain in the palace of the Countess Luchesini?"

"To that I cannot speak," answered the senator. "There is undoubtedly within the walls of the palace Luchesini one to whom none of the secrets of its late lamented master were hidden things; but of him your eminence may know more than I do. I allude to the father confessor of the late count, who fulfils the same sacred office for his widow, the padre Momoro. I know of no other."

The sharp decision of this replication seemed to bring the old ecclesiastic to a stand. He rose, slowly walked a few paces, and again returned to the seat he had occupied.

"Signor Bembo," at length he said, bowing to the senator with great courtesy, "it is only due to you that I should express my admiration of the promptitude and frankness with which you have been pleased to meet such enquiries as I have deemed my duty to make. If your excellency stood high in my esteem before this conversation, let me not be misinterpreted when I say that you now stand higher there than ever."

"Excuse my interruption," hastily interpellated the noble; "but I must really prevent, if possible, your eminence throwing away thanks where so few are deserved. I do so in order that I may state my belief to your eminence," very gravely continued Bembo, "that had my conduct been the reverse of that which you pleased so over-highly to commend, your eminence need not have been at a loss for the source whence to seek replies to all proper inquiries which your high sense of duty to the Church and to the Republic might prompt you to make."

The cardinal bowed. "I am at no loss, Signor Bembo, how to construe your excellency's expressions. The interview just passed induces me to coincide in that opinion, and your intimation of it still further raises you in my esteem. Signor Bembo," continued the cardinal, "I do not hesitate to say the Council of Ten are much bound to you; a compli-

ment, if it be one, in which I am confident the noble Marquis Spinelli will cordially concur."

The marquis bowed a marked assent.

"And now, if it pleases you, signors," courteously rejoined the cardinal, "we will change this conversation and this place."

"Your eminence cannot, of course, leave the villa Spinelli without some refreshment," said the marquis. "Bembo, you, I trust, are my guest, at least for the day."

"In five minutes you shall command me," replied the senator; who, as soon as the aged ecclesiastic and his host were lost in the thicket of fragrant shrubs which enveloped their place of meeting, paced to and fro with the air of a man who has got through some serious difficulty with unexpected ease and smoothness. Buried in thought, he slowly paced upon the same spot for a few minutes; when the sound of a bell from the mansion appeared to remind him that his presence was probably waited for. In his abstraction, he had omitted to note the path by which the marquis had conducted his aged guest. Irritated even by so slight an obstruction, and absorbed in his own conflicting thoughts, he stood and stamped upon the earth: the wary Italian no longer. "For what—for whom are those risks run?" he muttered. "For what is fair fame, nay, perchance fortune itself, compromised? I will know further. I will again question the padre. His hints shall be explained—or"—

Thus wrapt in inward passion, by an effort he impatiently tried to thread his way by a narrow path that winded through the thickets of myrtle and dark cypress by which he was surrounded. Before he had proceeded five paces, however, he stood, suddenly transfixed, as by some sight which sent the blood that boiled in his veins back to the heart. For a moment he was like marble. His visage, which, the minute before, bore the dark glow of passion, blanched to an ashen paleness. With a spasmodic grasp he involuntarily clutched, beneath his girdle, that stiletto, venomous and gemmed, which in that age every Venetian, of whatever rank, was known to wear; whilst the fiend within

now burned in his eye with a glare, compared to which the tiger's, when about to spring, is mildness. Before him lay the cause of this violent revulsion of his whole nature. Stretched upon a marble seat in a close alcove reclined a youth, seemingly in a deep and profound slumber.

The sleeper seemed to be of tall stature, though his looks would not evidence his having seen more than, perhaps, nineteen summers. He was richly dressed, and an embroidered cloak partly covered his bosom, which gently heaved as in the deep sleep of extreme lassitude. The face of the youth was too pale for an Italian. His hollow cheek gave sign of recent indisposition, marked as it was by a slight hectic glow that seemed copied from the blush-rose that raised itself against the marble seat where he reclined. His rich dark brown hair hung in clustering curls over his pale forehead. His features seemed finely cut, and approached the Italian model, whilst his long dark eyelashes added an ineffable grace to the whole contour of his visage. A small brown incipient moustache merely shaded his upper lip, to which a sleep, perhaps feverish, had imparted a rich red.

A few moments' pause seemed to restore the senator to something like self-possession. "Stay, let me be calm," he muttered to himself. "He is in my power in any case, and I will know if this sleep be feigned or real." With cautious step the senator came close up to the side of the sleeper. He moved not: his repose seemed of that intense kind with which the dire lassitude of debility or disease sometimes for a time relieves itself. Bembo cautiously bent over him as he lay, when his eye was caught by the glitter of a richly embroidered silken riband, of a deep flame colour, which showed itself beneath the vest. At this sight the blood suddenly rushed back again to the visage of the senator. For a moment his features assumed the darkness of a demon, and the stiletto, which he had returned to its sheath, was again convulsively grasped and half drawn forth. But a moment's pause again brought reflection back to the soul of the cautious senator. "No blood! at least not now!" he muttered to himself. "But this toy may peradventure do somewhat."

The stiletto, with its gemmed handle and thin double-edged blade, glittered in the sun: he waved it across the eyes of the sleeping youth, but he stirred not. "This sleep," thought Bembo, "is like that of death; and, despite yon palsied dotard of a cardinal, who can show that death is not a sleep?" With the edge of the weapon he severed the glistening riband, and cautiously drew it from the bosom of the sleeper. From it was suspended a miniature in enamel richly set. As he grasped it, and hid it in his bosom, a grim sardonic smile passed over the countenance of the senator. He silently sheathed his weapon, and threading the thickets with a noiseless step, left the garden.



CHAPTER IV.

THE PALAZZO LUCHESINI AND ITS INMATES.

THE palace Luchesini was situated upon one of the smaller islets which stud the lagune at the head of the Adriatic, and upon which the unique maritime city of Venice is built. It stood on that side of the city nearest the mainland. The structure was vast and massive, and of that heavy architecture, something betwixt a palace and a castle, which the circumstances of the earlier centuries immediately following the sack of Italy by the Vandal and Gothic races naturally produced. It was believed at one time to have belonged to the Signoria of the city, one of the governing Councils, and to have been used sometimes as a sort of state-prison as well as for other general purposes. This tradition the massive walls and half castellated style of the pile certainly countenanced. It had been, however, for nearly two centuries the property of the family of Luchesini; whose vast wealth, and occasional great political influence, had enabled them to change the character of the building from the aspect of a state-prison to that of a stately and magnificent, though massive and heavy palace.

The outer wall, which had originally surrounded the building, had been levelled with the ground. At vast expense the dimensions of the islet had been enlarged, and where a court-yard and arched gateway had formerly looked towards the land (probably with a view to easy and secret communication with the shore), a grove of myrtles and orange trees, sheltered from the gales by the spreading sycamore, now smiled luxuriantly in the sunshine, or cast deep shadow on the restless waters beneath the moon. Within the shelter of this thicket were laid out splendid gardens in the taste of the time; in the midst of which, surrounded by fragrant and flowering shrubs, a fountain of the purest water—a rarity in Venice—had been by vast exertion obtained. To the chief entrance of the palazzo, where it fronted the Adriatic wave, a beautiful flight of marble stairs gracefully led, and the whole noble pile, with its accompaniments, bespoke the wealth of the magnates of this rich republic, the spouse of the Adriatic and the mistress of commerce.

Under these circumstances, with the building was associated a good deal of dark tradition. Whilst under the sway of the Signoria it had been the scene of many mysterious political conflicts; and when it passed into the hands of the noble and energetic family of Luchesini, its secret history was not believed to be less interesting. Several members of this family had been not less conspicuous for their love of science, literature, and the arts, as they then existed, than for courage and sagacity in the service of the state; and hence in their annals some traditions of wild and strange interest were interwoven. In a secret suite of rooms within this palace it was said that Pietro Luchesini had, more than a century before, kept concealed, in a sumptuous and splendid retirement, a Turkish lady of exquisite beauty and remarkable accomplishments, to whom he was devotedly attached, and whose spells, attributed at that period to magic brought from Arabia and the more distant east, were reported to have been of force to draw him, like Solomon of old, from his faith, and to have bowed his head in worship of strange gods and the powers of the prince of the air. In the retire-

ment of this noted pile, more recently, the celebrated Regiomontanus was known to have received shelter and hospitality, and from its roofs not only to have conducted those astronomical researches which Galileo and Copernicus afterwards cultivated, but to have pursued, it was believed, under the tutelage of the then head of the house of Luchesini, those darker arts, which were, however, too weak in the end to preserve him from the jealousy and, perhaps, revenge of the Cardinal Bessarion and his emissaries. The arcana of Regiomontanus thus became the legacy of that Cornelius Agrippa who has come down to us with a shadowy celebrity—the dim fruits of those seeds sown by the less famous but more deeply erudite Hungarian.

With these dim traditions the story and character of the present possessor of this princely mansion, the Countess Luchesini, did not ill accord. She was known to have been received into the service of its late master, the Senator and Count Luchesini, in her early years, in consequence, it was said, of some remote connection between her family and that of the Venetian noble. In the Palace Luchesini she remained unknown to the world until the death of the countess. When it occurred vague reports became prevalent in the circles of the Venetian nobility, that the united beauty and talents of his young and fascinating *protégée* were obtaining a visible influence over the old senator, which the mode of her entrance under his roof as an unprotected orphan would not have induced mere cursory observers to anticipate. That these observations, retailed in secret, and only whispered amongst the numerous friends, dependants, and clients of the powerful senator, were not devoid of foundation the event proved. It became known to the world of Venice that the senator and count had espoused a second wife, and that he had been ultimately enslaved by the beautiful but friendless *protégée*, who had been received into his palace as a destitute and orphan infant.

This unexpected event caused no small sensation, as a matter of course; and it was equally so, that various versions should be given of the causes which led to this some-

what singular event. Some ventured to give out vague hints and insinuations, that the originally masculine intellect of the senator had become somewhat weakened by overstrained application and declining years. Others asserted that the talents of the young countess were such, as to render her no inefficient auxiliary to her husband in the conduct of some of the most delicate affairs of state. Both these asseverations might be true. That the great attachment which, during the short remnant of his life, the aged statesman showed he possessed for his comparatively youthful wife, might be ascribed to some degree of dotage, was no unnatural supposition. That she also possessed accomplishments sufficient to enable her to fascinate the attachment of a statesman, and a man versed in political intrigue, was also easily allowed.

Some of these accomplishments were of no common order ; rare in that age, and hardly to be expected at all in a female. Of some of the oriental tongues, it was asserted she possessed a competent knowledge ; and through her instrumentality, it was believed that much of the secret intelligence as to the designs of the Ottomans, which the Count Luchesini conveyed to the councils of state, were obtained. Be this as it might, her conduct as the wife of Count Luchesini was quite irreproachable. Exquisite as was her beauty,—and it was of that order which time, the general innovator, up to a certain period improves,—even the license of Venetian manners never breathed an insinuation against her conduct as a wife. To the wishes and the avocations of her husband, she seemed to be devoted ; and the occasions of their mingling with society, seemed to be dictated by his convenience alone. Those nobles of libertine manners, whose approaches the usages of society compelled her to permit, accused her of uniting to the beauty of a Venus the icy coldness of a vestal ; but to that which the dissolute called prudery, the wiser part of society attached a better epithet ; and the countess continued to act as the exemplary wife and accomplished companion of the aged statesman until his death, which occurred in about three years after his second marriage.

That her husband had preserved for her to the last, those feelings which prompted him to lift her from obscurity to splendour, was evident in the fact of his having, in default of heirs, left her the sole mistress of the great bulk of his vast property. The Countess Luchesini was made, by the death of her husband, perhaps the richest widow in Venice. In the prime of life, and in the full blaze of matured beauty, both of form and face, she of course had many suitors; but hitherto she had turned a deaf ear to all the offers and vows of love poured into her ear by the glittering crowd of nobles who frequented her saloons, and who partook of her hospitality: none apparently had been able to excite in her mind the slightest interest beyond the hour; to the no small wonder of some, and the deep and rancorous mortification of others.

Nor were these results by any means unnatural. Elegant as were the manners, and fascinating as were the accomplishments of the graceful and beautiful countess, there still might sometimes be felt an ill-concealed disdain of the frivolities of the fashionable throngs that crowded her halls, joined to an occasional reserved and cold mysteriousness, which irritated curiosity without in the slightest degree gratifying it. In her intercourse with society, and society the most refined that the age and country could afford, her thoughts at times seemed to be strangely absent from that which was before her: she appeared to converse mechanically with those near her, whilst her real reflections were fixed on some scene removed from the present. Such was the exterior of the Countess Luchesini, whose wealth and refined hospitality, however, never failed to secure for her the courtesies and attentions of those amidst whom she moved, whatever might occasionally be the inward emotions of some of her associates.

It was on one of those luxurious evenings which autumn in Italy often affords, that the apartments and grounds of the Palace Luchesini were brilliantly lighted up, and filled with a gay assemblage of guests, comprising most of the nobility of Venice. Not only was the rich suite of apartments usually

dedicated to festivity brilliantly illuminated, but the grounds amidst which the Palace Luchesini stood, were also tastefully decorated with lamps of that exquisitely stained glass for which Venice at that era was famed. In the tasteful alcoves shaded by the myrtle, the orange, the cypress, or the broad-leaved sycamore, refreshments were placed upon slabs of white marble; the sounds of music which issued in occasional bursts from the open windows of the stately building, were echoed by strains from without, some of which seemed to proceed from the water and to die away amid the sparkling ripple of the lagune, an expanse of which lay between the palazzo and the mainland.

Amid the other festivities in its interior, a masked ball, one of the great enjoyments of the Venetian capital, had been given; but the pleasures of the dance had now begun to yield to the desire of refreshment; and both within and without the walls of the building, might be seen groups of ladies and their cavaliers, seated at tables where every delicacy was found in profusion, whilst others might be observed whom the pleasures of wine and free converse had temporarily drawn apart from the society of beauty; and others still, to vary the excitement of a scene which afforded it almost without limit, might be remarked, deeply engaged in play, and absorbed in the emotions which its changeable fortunes, so fatally to some, are calculated to excite.

Amidst these groups moved the beautiful owner of the mansion, apparently busy in the enjoyment of the scene; and appearing to sympathize with the most frivolous and volatile of her guests. On this night, certainly her charms merited all the encomiums that the admiration of a crowd of flatterers, actuated however by various motives, unanimously bestowed upon them. Most of the beauty of the rich and luxurious city of the sea was present. Many of them were many years the junior of the radiant Countess Luchesini; but on this occasion, she certainly outshone them all.

Her stature was above that usual with the females of Italy, but at the same time possessed those requisites of perfect female attractiveness which many of them own to so

high a degree—the embonpoint, just to that extent which the connoisseur in beauty would dictate ; the smooth roundness of the neck and arms ; the cylindrical waist, short, and surmounting limbs, the admirable proportions of which no dress could fully conceal nor avoid frequently betraying. With this somewhat large structure of form, the step and gait of the beautiful countess were so light as to make her, when in motion, appear to the beholders sylph-like. When reclining, the contour of her figure was luxurious, but when in movement, it was light as the gossamer, gliding, and nymph-like. Thus until she actually danced, no one expected that she would outshine the most juvenile and graceful votaries of that enchanting art ; but having seen her dance, no one denied the vast superiority which the mingled lightness and majesty of her figure combined to secure.

The features of the countess were not less striking than her form and graces of motion. They were by no means essentially Italian, though combining much that is peculiar to the Italian female. The nose was slightly aquiline, but not markedly so ; the face beautifully oval, and the charmingly turned lips, full and round. The dark hazel eye, however, scintillated, when excited, with all the brilliance so remarkable in the voluptuous dames of sunny Italy, and when in repose, exhibited that deep, pensive, and languishing sensibility of which the charm is, perhaps, to cultivated minds the strongest of all. The mingled sweetness and intelligence of these features were in the countess heightened by a complexion of a clear brown, less dark by far than the usual complexion of those born in warm climates, yet darker than the fair hue of the colder climes of Europe, and suffused when she exerted herself, or when she blushed, with that rich ruddy tint, without which, no female complexion, however fair and beautiful, can be perfect. When engaged in conversation, nothing could be more animated than her expression ; but when lost in reflection, she sometimes knit her brows, and appeared to revolve thoughts deeply treasured and long preserved. A keen observer might trace the lines

of thoughts deeper than those which the sex are accustomed to own; and which, for a brief moment perhaps, injured that extraordinary juvenility of countenance which she still preserved, though beyond that age which we are accustomed to consider juvenile.

Whilst the countess was moving through the range of brilliantly illuminated apartments which overlooked the richly wooded grounds of the palace, adding gaiety and grace to the various groups who, having removed their masks, were regaling themselves with the profusion of delicacies set before them, a party of four or five young men might have been observed seated in an alcove deeply shadowed by the myrtle and acacia, and fragrant with flowering shrubs, now in all their beauty. They were enjoying the cool airs that occasionally breathed over the face of the glittering Adriatic and gently stirred the leaves here and there, silvered with light, under which they sat, whilst they sipped those light and sparkling wines, which, in such a climate, are given to invigorate spirits languid with a sultry atmosphere, and liable to that lassitude which is one of the drawbacks from the pleasures of a climate in all else perfection. They seemed to be employed in gay and joyous conversation, to which the charm of wine added both zest and unguardedness; and their sportive sallies seemed to be directed against one of their number, who was certainly, in all respects, a contrast to the rest.

It was the same youth whom we have already seen sleeping in the recess of the retired garden of the Marquis Spinelli, where he was so unexpectedly discovered by the senator Bembo. He was, however, in some respects changed. His tall and manly figure had lost part of its tendency to attenuation; and his visage, on which the hectic flush of fever had before glistened, now exhibited that paleness which convalescence after some acute suffering must more or less produce. To the raillery of his young companions he said little, answering mostly with a smile; but the latent expression of that smile, as it lightened over his manly features, might, by near observers, be seen to partake somewhat of that hardly acknowledged contempt for his more frivolous associates, which

all the courtesies of innately strong minds does not, on every occasion, enable them entirely to conceal.

"Let him alone," said the young Albertini, laughing; "like the rest of his blood he seems resolved to belie the praises of Pope Gregory; how the holy father ever came to think these islanders 'Angeli,' rather than 'Angli,' passes my comprehension."

"And mine too," responded Memmo, a young and somewhat effeminate Venetian sprig of nobility; "they seem made by nature to be grave when all the rest of the world are laughing."

"Well! we are quits sometimes," retorted the young Englishman—for such he was—with a slight tinge of sarcasm in his quiet tone. "We can sometimes laugh when others are inclined to be grave."

"Then, would to Heaven!" returned Memmo, colouring—for his gaiety in the vicinity of an enemy was not by any means conspicuous—"then would to Heaven Lent were fairly here, so that we might see a laugh on that marble visage!"

"Come, come! signor," interposed Albertini, "you have played the 'interesting' to perfection, and are only exhausting the part. Leave some arrows in the quiver, signor; for though wounds got in battle produce their like by sympathy in fair bosoms, it is not good to be over confident."

"He can best speak to that who has had experience," responded the young Englishman, drily.

"Tell that to the senator Bembo," rejoined Albertini quickly, fearing the laugh was turning against him; for he too was very sensitive to the charm of beauty when joined to wealth. "Tell that to the puissant Bembo"—reiterated Albertini, wishing to put the sarcasm upon other shoulders—"and see what he says to it."

"What he says or does not say on such a subject cannot concern me, that I know of," quietly remarked the young Delaney—for such was his name.

"Oh! no! we dare say not," laughingly responded several of the company.

"Well!" remarked Lanfranco, a manly cavalier of thirty,

"were I in your buskins, young signor, I should, at all events, *try* to welcome *la Bonne Fortune* with a smile, were it only for courtesy!"

"When I feel myself in the presence of the goddess," replied the young soldier, still more drily than before, "I shall endeavour, probably, to do the agreeable, to the best of my small capacity in that line."

"None so blind as those who won't see!" interjected Memmo.

"Will nothing short of miracle thaw this English ice?" asked Albertini with affected gravity.

"If a miracle be wanted," hastily echoed Lanfranco, making a sign to his companions, "here comes one, methinks, the most likely to perform it, or I much err;" and, as he spoke, the silvery tones of a female voice were heard, and presently came up the Countess Luchesini, radiant with beauty, followed by the obsequious senator Bembo.

"Noble lady," said the cavalier, with an affection of gallantry not uncommon in that age, but more formal than easy, "you reverse the vulgar old proverb, and show us that angels can appear when appealed to."

"Not, I hope, to spoil mirth, as I am at present doing, I fear," said the countess laughingly.

"Not to spoil mirth, but to add to it," rejoined the cavalier. "We only want a pleasant miracle, and a charmer to work it, lady," he added, with a laugh.

"If that be the burthen of your invocation, signors," said the lady, "I fear me it is a vain one."

"That cannot be, lady," interposed Albertini, "unless it be beyond the power of beauty to thaw a bit of stubborn English ice. We pray your ladyship to teach this grave, young unfortunate, how becoming a thing a smile is upon a young man's face!" As he turned to the young Englishman whilst he spoke, even the dim light of the arbour could not conceal a sudden blush which coloured for a moment the beautiful features of the countess, and then, like an aurora, faded again as suddenly as it had exhibited itself; and more than one of the party noticed the sudden expression of pain with which the senator Bembo involuntarily bit his lip.

The youthful Englishman seemed to feel himself doubly appealed to ; and with a quiet courtesy gracefully bowing to his beautiful and noble hostess, he gaily responded, taking her hand with a respectful deference, "Let this be accorded me for the next dance and the feat is done."

"Nay," exclaimed the countess, at once recovering herself, and smilingly giving her hand ; "if wonders can be worked so cheaply, methinks I must e'en turn cabalist."

"No unfit profession, unless traditions lie," remarked Bembo, with deep and bitter though well concealed sarcasm, "for the mistress of the Palazzo Luchesini."

At the sound of this strange interpellation, the beautiful countess, expert as she was in the art of veiling her emotions, visibly started ; and turning half-round, seemed about to address the senator, whose studied smile afforded a dubious commentary to a speech as dubious. In a moment, however, she recovered her self-possession, and giving Bembo a glance in which wonder seemed to be followed by calm contempt, took the offered arm of the young Delancy, and led the way to the interior of the palace ; from which the hilarious sounds of light and gay music again began to be heard, and the shadows of the dancers might be seen flitting across the illumined windows. Bembo, the senator, with knitted brows, slowly followed, accompanied by the rest of the party ; upon most of whom the scene just enacted had made more or less of impression.

"Know you what he meant by his allusion to the *Cabala* of the Palace Luchesini?" asked Albertini, in a whisper, of the Cavalier Lanfranco.

"I do not know, and therefore cannot inform you," replied the cavalier ; "but there be those in Venice who perhaps could guess."

"You speak in riddles !" rejoined Albertini, in a low voice.

"It is the fashion of the hour," was the baffling replication of the cavalier, as he entered the palace and again mingled with the gay throng to evade further question.

On his arrival there, he soon discovered, by the unusual press of the gay multitude towards one of the rooms from

which issued the sound of music, that the countess was about to keep her engagement with the young Englishman ; nor was he disappointed in the display which he expected. The countess danced with infinite grace, and certainly never looked more lovely than on this occasion. That she was pleased with her juvenile partner was evident ; and the unusual animation which this gave to her always charming countenance—in which, when not excited, might sometimes be traced a look of anxious and pensive melancholy—made her beauty seem for the moment perfection.

Nor was the youthful Englishman deficient in those graces which act too surely sometimes upon the female bosom. Though much taller than the ordinary stature, he was yet formed with great symmetry, and his motions were easy and graceful. The paleness, which before had imprinted a trace of effeminacy upon his otherwise fine countenance, was now totally removed. The Italian sun had again begun to imbrown his visage ; and the animation of the moment, aided by the wine he had drunk, had fully restored to his cheek that healthy glow of the richest tint, which is the crowning grace of manly beauty in youth.

As the charming countess and he led off the dance, a buzz of delight, which could not be suppressed, ran round the hall ; and when, on its conclusion, he gracefully led his partner to one of the saloons dedicated to refreshment, he was followed by the envy of many and the admiration of all. Seated beside the beautiful countess, whose animated conversation was far superior to the general tone of female converse in that age, and who exerted herself to the uttermost to interest her young partner, his breast began to feel stirrings of emotion to which it had been before a stranger, and the soft and silvery voice of his companion, coming from such lips, thrilled through his bosom with a sensation as delicious as new.

As the youth and his fair companion thus beguiled the time, both for the moment heedless of the busy and brilliant throngs scattered through the apartments of the palace, they were by no means unobserved by such guests as happened to

be seated in other parts of the saloon, on the tables of which a profusion of refection was spread.

"The young northman seems to have made a discovery at last," said a disagreeable creaking and affected voice at the further extremity of the saloon. The speaker, the Count of Salerno, was not more prepossessing than were his tones. Thin and cadaverous, he had the appearance of a worn-out debauchee of fifty, who, by aid of dress and assumed airs of juvenility, still expected to pass for a cavalier of thirty.

"And what is that, Salerno?" asked the person addressed—an Italian of sneering and forbidding countenance, though richly dressed, and evidently one of the magnates of the era.

"Why, he seems to have found out, my lord marquis," rejoined the other with a laugh, "that there are women as well worth looking at as his mama!"

"Methinks there is something *rather maternal* in the cooing that is going on yonder," remarked his companion, with a sneer that seemed habitual.

"Nay, marquis," replied the count, "surely even you, critic as you are of female charms, will not deny the Countess Luchesini to be really beautiful."

"Who denies it?" asked the other. "But we must own her charms are fully matured. Now, whatever yonder green-horn may do, I confess I prefer the bud to the rose—youth and beauty for me!"

"Men mostly prefer their opposites!" said a sharp voice from behind the speaker. The sarcasm was followed by a loud laugh; but the Italian, not at all disconcerted, quietly looked round to see who was the author of an interruption so unexpected.

"Oh! Signor Thomaso!" exclaimed the Marquis Odel-scalchi, for such was his title, "playing 'jester to the palace,' as usual, eh?"

"Where game is so abundant, it is impossible to balk the sport," retorted Thomaso; who, at the Palace Luchesini, was a sort of "chartered libertine" in jests and drolleries.

"Where wine is so abundant, it is impossible to hold one's

tongue," returned the Italian, with a keener bitterness in his habitual expression of sneering.

"Methought wine brought out truth, if the old saying holds good," gravely observed an old senator, who had not so far joined in the conversation.

"Ay! where there is any to bring out," responded the Italian, glancing at Thomaso.

"Wine!" exclaimed Albertini, gazing towards the countess and the young Englishman, who seemed to be holding animated converse with his graceful hostess, "will any one tell me that wine has any share in the inspiration of yonder youngster, who seems to have undergone a thorough metamorphosis to-night?"

"Not I, for one," quietly interposed the Cavalier Lanfranco. "The countess is certainly wondrous bewitching to-night, it must be admitted."

"And who is to be the victim of the spell now?" asked the Italian, with a peculiar inflection of the voice as he said it. "Yonder youth, I suppose," he added, carelessly answering his own question.

"He seems in a fair way to his fate," rejoined the cavalier, eyeing the Italian steadily for a moment. "If ever woman looked an angel of light," he went on admiringly, "the Countess Luchesini does so at this moment—does she not?"

"Fallax Gratia; Vana Pulchritudo. Mulier Jehovæ metuens, illa laudabilis," uttered a deep and suppressed voice, slowly but most articulately.

The old senator started and involuntarily crossed himself. All turned round to ascertain whence words so strange had proceeded. They were too late. A figure, enveloped in a long cloak or domino, whose proximity to their locality had been unobserved before by the festive party, glided through the folding doors of the saloon with deliberate but noiseless step, and the slow motion of tardy age. That the words just uttered had been spoken by this singular and unknown guest, all concluded, but the motive of the utterer no one could fathom; and for a few seconds they looked at each other, bewildered, as if for an explanation. None, however, was offered; nor

did any one seem inclined to inquire further into a proceeding so mysterious and unaccountable.

"Take another cup of wine, Signor Thomaso," said the Italian Marquis, the first to recover his self-possession. "Another cup, I beseech you ; for this Latin seems even to have stuck in your facetious gizzard as well as in those of the rest of the company."

Thomaso, who certainly looked very pale, showed no disinclination to accede to a proposal so reasonable, and was helping himself to some of the vintage with which the table was stored, when the attention of the party was attracted by the entrance of Father Momoro ; who, respectfully and hesitatingly approaching the countess, delivered into her hands a sealed billet. On breaking the seal and perusing its contents, which seemed not unexpected by the fair recipient, it was not very difficult to perceive, in the countenance of the countess, some traces of that nervous trepidation which communications of import are apt to produce upon persons of sensibility. The feeling was, however, brief and transient. Recovering in a moment that graceful self-possession for which she was remarkable, she smilingly apologized to her young guest for an interruption to their converse which was on her part involuntary, and left the apartment by the same door through which the mysterious utterer of the Latin text had passed ; followed by the priest, who walked with eyes bent upon the ground, as if anxious to avoid any appearance of sympathy with the luxurious and brilliant scene around him.



CHAPTER V.

THE CONCLAVE.

LEAVING the wing of the palace dedicated to the reception of company, the countess, accompanied by the padre, entered a vaulted passage dimly lighted. Father Momoro, taking from a niche a lamp, which stood there as in readiness, pre-

ceded and lighted his patroness to the end of the corridor, from which a somewhat narrow and winding marble staircase seemed to lead to the opposite wing of the palace. The stairs soon ended in a landing, lighted by a narrow window of stained glass, through which the moonbeams, as they gleamed, cast a faint and sickly light upon the chequered marble pavement. Still preceding the countess, the priest now opened an antique carved oaken door of massive proportions, which swung heavily upon its hinges. A short passage beyond seemed to lead to a similar door, which Father Momoro, carefully closing the first behind him, softly opened. This second door led to an apartment of moderate area, but of considerable altitude, of a sort of octagonal shape.

It was lighted in the day-time by Gothic windows of somewhat large size, mostly filled with stained glass. The walls seemed of great thickness, and the apartment appeared to be a floor in one of the towers which formed a part of the wing of this extensive and ancient building. The beams of the moon, which streamed faintly in at some of the compartments of the window, showed beyond the waves of the Adriatic, seen over the summits of the trees which on all sides surrounded the Palace Luchesini. The room itself, into which the countess and her confessor now entered, was covered all round with carved panels of some dark and richly-veined wood. The roof was groined and sculptured, tapering up into a sort of cupola, from the centre of which hung a huge antique bronze lamp, the light of which fell on a massive table below, also richly carved. Round the whole apartment attached to the pannelled walls, and strongly carved with grotesque devices, were couches, the seats of which were stuffed and covered with some strong but rich tissue of a deep crimson colour. Upon the whole, the apartment appeared like a sort of council-room for the discussion of secret business; so remote was it from the ordinary halls of the palace, and so carefully guarded from the sight and hearing of those without.

At the end of the table, upon an antique chair of the same wood, with the rest of the furnishing of the secluded cell,

sat a person with writing materials before him, who, by his garb and bearing, might seem to be a secretary or scribe. At the other end, was an unoccupied seat, and upon the couch at the side of the table, sat the aged cardinal enveloped in a cloak; the Marquis Spinelli, richly dressed in slashed velvet, according to the fashion of that time; and a third personage in black, who seemed also to be an ecclesiastic, and whose monkish and plain habiliments added harshness to his pale, massive, and strongly cut features.

On entering, the countess turned slightly pale, but preserved complete self-possession; she was handed by her attendant to the vacant chair at the end of the table, and after a graceful but reverential obeisance to the cardinal and his companions, she seated herself in silence; Father Momoro standing behind her, with his hands crossed upon his breast, as waiting orders.

"We thank you, daughter, for this attendance," began the cardinal, as soon as the countess had seated herself: "is it your wish that your reverend attendant shall remain?"

"Father Momoro is, as I believe your eminence is aware, my own confessor and chaplain," answered the lady calmly; "nor can any word be spoken by me, nor can any word be spoken to me in this presence (bowing to the cardinal as she spoke) to which I could wish his ear to be a stranger."

"The padre will remain then," interposed the Marquis Spinelli, making a sign to the priest, who humbly seated himself on a couch by the window; where he was shadowed however from the faint beam of the moon, which allowed him to observe all that passed without the lineaments of his countenance being easily discernible.

"It is only meet that we should begin this conference," said the cardinal, turning for a moment to the ecclesiastic his companion, "by thanking the noble Countess Luchesini for the many and deep services which she has rendered to the Republic and its councils."

"I am under the protection of the Republic, and of its just and impartial laws," quietly answered the countess; "and it is no more than my bounden duty to return that

benefit with such service as one of my sex can render ; which of course is trifling."

"Not so, daughter," replied the cardinal. "Had they been trifling, this interview had never been sought. But your services, noble lady, have been great."

The countess bowed.

"And great services," continued the priest, "have, like all else that is human, some grains of evil mixed with their good. They demand more and stricter inquiry than deeds of lighter note ; when the safety of states is in question, and when religion may be compromised as well as safety."

A slight change of colour might have been observed in the countenance of the lovely countess, as the aged priest let fall the closing words. It was, however, transient as slight.

"It is for your eminence to inquire, and for me to answer as far as power can second will," she calmly replied. "For what else am I here?"

"Your answer, daughter, is discreet and such as becomes you," rejoined the ecclesiastic. "Nor shall we ask aught that you need hesitate to disclose, or that it is not needful that the state should know. You are aware, I believe, that to your late husband, the statesman Count Luchesini, the councils of the Republic were often indebted for intelligence of the highest import."

"I am so aware," was the reply of the countess.

"May I ask for what length of time you possessed this knowledge?" inquired the cardinal.

"For the greater portion of my married life : for the last four or five years of that of the late Count Luchesini"—was the quiet replication.

"For no longer period than that you have now named?"

"No !" steadily replied the countess—"for that period, and no longer."

The cardinal paused for a moment, looked at his companion, as if to read the expression of his countenance, and then proceeded :

"You were, I think, daughter, an inmate in the palace of the late count prior to your nuptials?"

"I was, for some years ;" replied the countess.

"As a part of his household, I think, daughter?"

"As a part of his household."

"And during this period, you had no knowledge of those services which, in the shape of secret and valuable intelligence, he was so often able to render to the République?"

"None in the least!"

"Nor of the instruments whom he employed?" added the priest in a somewhat marked tone.

The countess again changed slightly and momentarily, but answered without hesitation,—

"Nor of the instruments employed. That is, as knowing them to be such," she added, after a momentary pause.

As she said this, a sudden and bitter smile passed suddenly across the hard visage of Father Momoro, who eagerly and anxiously appeared to listen to every word that passed. It was only for an instant, however; and the father checking it, relapsed at once into the grave and attentive expression he had borne from the first.

"Your last expression involves something of uncertainty, daughter," gravely remarked the interrogator of the countess.

"As how?" said she, in reply. "I might, during the period of my early residence in Count Luchesini's house, see guests there whom I only knew as guests; and such was perhaps the case. What of uncertainty, or what worthy of remark, does your eminence find in a fact so common?"—asked the countess, in her turn.

"None that your reply has not removed, daughter," blandly rejoined the cardinal, as if to reassure the person questioned. "But we would still know farther, whether some, then only known to you as guests, have not since been known to you as instruments?"

"As your eminence says, so it has been;" answered the countess firmly: "as to that, I wish no concealment."

"Your reply becomes you, daughter," rejoined the priest, "for it is candid. But this naturally leads to a further inquiry. Knowing the instruments through whom these valuable secrets were obtained, have you, daughter, been without

knowledge of the means which they employed to procure primarily the divulging of intelligence so dangerous in the quest for him who divulged, and for him who inquired?"

"I am without that knowledge," calmly responded the countess. "By what means any secret intelligence communicated to the council of state by the late Count Luchesini, or by myself since his death, was primarily obtained, I know as little as your eminence, or as any one in this presence."

The calm directness of this communication, from lips so fair, seemed to give pause to the cardinal. He turned to his companions and conversed with them for a minute in a low tone of voice; after which, he again resumed the strange and mysterious course of questioning which characterized this singular and extraordinary interview.

"To you, fair lady," the cardinal went on to say, "I can readily conceive that our course may seem tortuous, and our quest misdirected. It grieves us to think that such may be the case. Still, we need not assure you, fair daughter, that where the law, not only of the state, but of our holy faith, requires it, we must not shrink from a duty sacred though unpleasing."

"These apologies, I trust your eminence will believe me, are needless in this case, though a woman be their object. On what point further does your eminence require explanation?" asked the countess. "Let me know it; and the explanation, as far as I am capable of giving it, shall not be withheld."

"You have stated, daughter, that you do not know the nature of these means," remarked the cardinal. "We believe it. But have you never, daughter, had reason to infer that nature?"

"Certainly not. I have never had ground for such inferences," rejoined the countess decidedly.

"That such may be your impression, we believe," replied the aged interrogator, after a moment's pause; "but the omission to infer does not always imply an absence of grounds for inference. The unsuspecting ever are slow to suspect."

"Allow me to say," interrupted the countess spiritedly "that to me at least, your eminence speaks in riddles."

"My meaning shall be explained, lady," returned the cardinal, with more of sternness in his visage and tone than he had yet assumed. "During the lifetime of the late Count Luchesini, this palace was doubtless the resort of occasional strangers and of many guests."

"Being the palace of a nobleman, wealthy, and of great employments, which was the case with my late lord," calmly rejoined the countess, "it could hardly be otherwise."

"Of that we are of course well aware," remarked the cardinal; "and these guests would equally, of course, be known to the Countess Luchesini."

"My lord cardinal and signors," said the countess, after a pause, but with a marked dignity both of tone and manner, "to what these questions lead I do not of course know; nor am I anxious to know whither they lead. Your eminence, and this nobleman at least," turning to the Marquis Spinelli, "are not ignorant of the facts connected with my long residence under this roof. Concealment of them I never wished, nor have ever studied. That, during my knowledge of the house of the late Count Luchesini, its occasional stranger-inmates have been varied and numerous, is only saying what is known to all Venice, and, of course, to your eminence. I have only known, perhaps, directly what you, my lord, have known more circuitously, but equally well."

"As to that, daughter, which you so properly remark, there can neither be doubt nor question," rejoined the priest, pausing for a moment; "but may there not have been some of these numerous inmates whose manners and pursuits may have rendered them objects of a deeper curiosity than others?"

By the distant but mysterious insinuation couched under this phrase the countess was momentarily disconcerted; and the more so, probably, because the harsh cold eye of the stranger ecclesiastic at this moment fixed itself upon her countenance. A slight paleness was succeeded by as transient a flush—the sure index of some inward suppressed

emotion. Immediately recovering herself, and pausing for a few moments, however, she deliberately replied,—

“The question of your eminence is a wide one; nor can it be answered, at least on the sudden, otherwise than generally. Of the many inmates of this palace my recollection must necessarily be imperfect: some, indeed many, of them being natives of other countries, may have had, and in all probability actually had, habits and manners at variance with the ideas of one whose prepossessions have been formed by those immediately around her. Connecting this inquiry, however, with others which your eminence has been pleased to make, I can only assure this august presence that, in such occasional discrepancies, I never discovered grounds for disadvantageous inference; nor felt that anything was to be discovered beyond those varieties of conduct, pursuit, external manner, and general accomplishment which all foreigners must be expected more or less to exhibit. This,” continued the countess, “is all the answer I can give to a query so general; and I may be allowed to add, that it is for your eminence first to particularise if communications more minute be desirable, of which I of course cannot judge.”

As the countess, strong in beauty and dignity, delivered this guarded answer, a strange mixture of painful but intense curiosity, and then of blank disappointment, passed over the visage of Father Momoro, who with intense attention watched and noted every word and gesture of the speakers.

The aged cardinal seemed equally disconcerted. He exhibited the air of a man who suddenly loses his path and cannot recover it. At last, abruptly turning the current of his discourse, he resumed,—

“In this direction there is no need to particularise, daughter. Be it so. To the noble Countess Luchesini, however, as well as to her late lord, the revered and trusty minister Count Luchesini, the state is deeply obliged. Are we to assume that, in some cases, the agents may be identical?”

“To that I have nothing to object,” was the reply.

“It is well,” rejoined the cardinal slowly. “You must, I think, be aware, daughter,” he continued, “that to great

services are often joined, from their own nature, embarrassments which lighter passages know not of; and that they who serve a state must be content to make or to submit to inquiries from which individual benefactors are free. In such cases our duty to the state compels us to construe all mystery into possible danger; whilst our holy faith," and here he crossed himself with much solemnity, "teaches us to view all darkness as possible evil. Hence, however faithful our intelligence, or those who convey it, still duty requires us to know, if possible, something of the sources whence it is derived: for better is it in all cases that a state should err than be betrayed. Better is it in all cases that our holy Church should be unserved than polluted," and the cardinal again crossed himself.

"In these things it is for your eminence to expound; for us to listen and obey," observed the countess, meekly bending as she spoke.

"You say well and dutifully, fair daughter," responded the aged cardinal, "and we esteem your words at nothing less. Now to the point. That agency through which the late excellent, noble, and magnifico Count Luchesini rendered to the Republic services of so signal a nature still exists."

The countess bowed.

"Of the nature of that agency we would know more."

"That knowledge," replied the countess, "must depend, under God and the Holy Virgin," and here the countess devoutly crossed herself, "upon the will of the agent; for by his alone can it be communicated."

"But through you, daughter, must not the communication come?" responded the cardinal.

"I know not that, holy father."

"But by you it must be required, daughter."

"The will of your eminence is mine," rejoined the countess: "my poor services, my life if need be, are the state's."

"Be it so," replied the cardinal firmly. "Daughter, we would see this agent face to face, and let our eyes approve the evidence of our ears. Our duty to our holy religion and

to the Republic demands no less. It is of you that we must seek such opportunity, for where else may we find it?"

"I am the humble messenger of your eminence's will," replied the countess, "but I can command nothing. If I could, the rest would be easy."

"Our will you know already," rejoined the cardinal, in a subdued tone. "What more, daughter, may be required?"

"The conditions," answered the countess firmly.

"Conditions! between the Republic and a spy, lady!—Yet stay," said the cardinal, perceiving he had spoken too hastily, "peradventure he is no subject of Venice nor its laws?"

"Were he a denizen of the Republic, he would be safe in the protection of its just and equitable code," rejoined the countess: "but aliens to the state may reasonably require a safe-conduct."

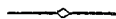
"Be it so, daughter, and so be it communicated," said the cardinal. Here he held a crucifix, which was suspended from his neck, devoutly to his lips. "I swear, in behalf of the state, and of this presence, that he shall come and go unharmed in any case. To you this delicate duty is now intrusted, lady; need I add, as you would deserve well of the state, see to it! We would not detain you further." The cardinal bowed; and the countess, making a low, profound, and reverential obeisance, silently left the apartment, followed as before by the confessor with his eyes fixed upon the ground.

The carved doors, swinging heavily upon their hinges, had closed upon the lady and her priestly attendant; and the aged cardinal had turned to make some remark to his reverend but mysterious companion, when their attention was suddenly roused by an exclamation from the Marquis Spinelli, who, starting from his seat, rushed towards the single window that lighted the apartment. Through its Gothic tracery and fantastic compartments, rich with Venetian glass of many dyes, streamed suddenly a brilliance so intense as to appear to extinguish the faint rays of the moon and to pervade the apartment. It proceeded evidently from

the Adriatic, gilding the trembling summits of the trees that surrounded the palazzo as it shot through them, lighting up the Gothic window with an unearthly glare, and throwing the shadows of its varied tracery and the hues of its stained and storied panes wavering and quivering on the carved walls within. "*Nobis absint noctis dæmones malefici*," muttered the priest, as his companion aghast gazed through the open lattice upon the night so strangely illumined; but as he spoke the brilliance suddenly faded and died, the moon re-assumed her silver empire, and upon the trembling waves of the distant Adriatic, whence the rays had seemed to emanate, floated a streak of wan, pale mist, through which might be observed a speck, which the imagination of those who saw might shape in to some skiff retiring from a scene so unusual.

"By the immaculate Mother of God, but this is passing strange!" exclaimed Spinelli, in whose pallid visage astonishment was still depicted.

As he uttered the words, the monk touched his arm, and placing a finger on his own lip as a signal of silence, left the casement. As he did so Father Momoro again entered the apartment, bearing a lamp, and the party silently left the place of a conference which had so mysteriously concluded, preceded by the confessor as their guide and light-bearer through the intricacies of the palace of Luchesini, the scene of so many dark tales and wild traditions.



CHAPTER VI.

THE WIZARD SKIFF.

"You must know, my dear boy, that I have never through life opposed your virtuous wishes and desires, even when opposed to my own predilections. But, in a matter of this kind, I hardly feel it allowable to have an opinion. It is of so much consequence to him who decides that the decision

should really be his own, that even an opinion on my part seems to me almost an unwarranted interference."

The person who uttered these words was a female of commanding presence, though evidently suffering under great debility and indisposition. She lay reclined upon a couch, which was placed near the open lattice of the window of the room, apparently that she might enjoy the cool breeze of evening and observe the scene passing beneath.

The room itself was plain, though antique in its decorations and furniture, and showed little worth notice save some portraits on the walls, painted in the highest style of that day, when Van Eyck and Hans Holbein had only recently cultivated the exquisite art of painting in oil colours. They appeared to be family pictures, and the style of dress, where armour was not worn, was English, as were the countenances. The window overlooked that part of Venice which was in proximity to the harbour and arsenal. In this district of the city, not only gondolas, but boats and skiffs of every fashion of other nations constantly plied, whilst from their white sails or painted oars, as they dipped into the clear green water, the rays were thrown back with a bright glitter. The scene was one to amuse an invalid by the exhibition of bustle and change, at the same time that the fresh air of the sea might quicken the spirits and refresh the debilitated frame.

On a carved table near the couch were strewn a few books, mostly of English origin. There was the *Utopia* of More, the *Law-tracts* of the learned and venerable Fortescue, the *History of Bede*, the *Chronicle of Asser*, the diversified poems of Geoffrey Chaucer and Lydgate, and the more modern sonnets of the accomplished Earl of Surrey. Neither was the Italian literature of the era wanting, nor those legendary volumes in which the Roman Church magnified the virtues and miracles of her saints and martyrs; and amongst these might be noted such few tracts relative to navigation and to naval and military art as the age afforded, whilst in various parts of the room might be observed charts and maps of various countries, mostly bordering on the

Mediterranean, with some models apparently connected with naval architecture and fortification. The apartment, in short, partook of the character both of the boudoir and the study, and was evidently the favourite retreat of those who then occupied it,—a nook for leisure and contemplation, uninterrupted by strangers, and rarely open even to friends the most near or familiar.

The lady herself who uttered the words which we have just recorded was in appearance highly interesting. In figure she was commanding, being something taller in stature than the Countess Luchesi. Disease or sorrow, or both, had, however, somewhat attenuated her form, depriving it of that voluptuous roundness which distinguishes Italian female beauty, as well as that elasticity which never can exist save in company with perfect health and spirits unabated. Her complexion was pale, with a slight hectic tinge on the cheek; and her features, though highly regular and noble, and approaching the Italian more than the English contour, yet indicated the presence of long debility, and that nervous depression which early sorrows and unlooked-for vicissitudes create in delicate forms and temperaments unfitted to wrestle with the world. By this tinge of melancholy and this delicacy of fibre, the intellectual expression of countenance was, however, rather heightened than otherwise, and that look of mild dignity which no ill health can destroy, rendered perhaps more interesting even than it would have been under circumstances more favourable.

Seated near the couch on which his parent reclined, for the lady was no other than the Baroness Delancy, sat young Raymond, now in all the flush of youthful but manly beauty and elegance. A deeper glow than usual overspread his fine but somewhat stern features, and his whole air was that of one who feels an interest more deep in what is passing than he cares altogether to reveal, even to himself.

“If such be your feeling, dear madam,” said Raymond, replying to his mother’s considerate observations, “how happens it, I would venture to ask, that you touch upon this subject at all?”

"Nay, Raymond, blame me not," rejoined the baroness. "I only allude to that which is talked of by all Venice, and which surely cannot be a forbidden topic to me."

"Heaven forbid!" replied the young man; "and pray what *is* this in which all Venice seems determined to take an interest; and how does it affect a person so insignificant as I must appear in the eyes of the magnificoes of this luxurious and puissant Republic?"

"He who (it seems) is fortunate enough to be noticed favourably by the beautiful and wealthy Countess Luchesini," said the baroness, smilingly, "can hardly be insignificant even in the proud eye of a Venetian magnifico, Raymond."

"I am happy, dear madam, to see you in the disposition to jest, and long may you be so," rejoined the young man. "I am aware the fair countess is a favourite of yours; and being so must, I am sure, be entitled to every homage that can be paid to beauty and to virtue."

"I did not jest, Raymond," gravely resumed the baroness; "nor am I inclined to do so. Nor is it my wish to undervalue the Countess Luchesini. On the contrary, I am quite ready to acknowledge that I never met with any one who, in so short a time, so powerfully attracted my sympathy and esteem."

"And yet you seem to warn your son against the fascination of her attractions," said Raymond.

"By no means," was the reply of the baroness; "I only meant to warn you against the rash haste and too sudden decisions to which youth is prone. To no one do I believe esteem is more fully due than to the Countess Luchesini."

"To that I can only add, dear madam, that your feelings are mine also, with regard to the lady you mention."

"Are you sure of that, Raymond?"

"Certainly I am," replied the young man, with an air of some confusion. "Can you, my dear mother, possibly doubt it?"

"I did not say so, Raymond; I would only ask, is this feeling of esteem *all* that you entertain for the beautiful countess?"

The young man coloured deeply. "It may not be all, madam. Charms like those of the Countess Luchesi may easily create feelings more warm than mere esteem. Let me, however, warn you in turn : do not give too implicit a credence to the tales with which the idle and luxurious of this city amuse or annoy each other ; for malice is as busy as folly. To the charms of my mother's beautiful friend I cannot pretend to be insensible. But at the same time I cannot but be sensible also that there exist reasons and considerations, many and multiform, that may dissuade from a too hasty submission to feelings which, however pure and right in themselves, are not to be treated apart from the considerations of prudence, and of the feelings of others justly dear to me."

As Raymond Delancy gravely uttered these sentences, the countenance of the baroness radiated with a joy and satisfaction to which they were unhappily too much of strangers.

"Raymond," she replied, taking her son's hand, "these sentiments do honour both to your understanding and your heart, and are all I could wish. There are, I know, daughters of England, of noble lineage, and nurtured in accomplishments equal or more than equal to any that the fairest dames of these climes can boast ; ay, and of beauty that may rival the charms that the best of Italy can boast : but alas ! we are far from them. Our halls are trodden by the stranger ; and we are exiles from our native land, dependent on the pay and protection of those who speak not our tongue, but are alien to our race, and only repay our blood with gold."

The voice of the baroness faltered with emotion, and the unbidden tear stood in her languidly blue eye, whilst the tremulous motion of her eyelids and of her pallid lips showed how keenly these recollections acted upon the too sensitive nerves of the invalid.

Her son was much moved, for yet, of all woman-kind, he loved his parent. Grasping her feverish hand, he strove to instil pleasanter anticipations than those which he had unconsciously roused.

"Nay, madam," he said, "you now suffer mournful imaginations to carry you too far. We shall yet see our halls again. England, though her destinies be clouded and her sons misled and wanderers from the right way, is not lost. We shall not be exiles always. The fair dames of Britain shall yet be as angels in our sight, and her white-haired men as prophets. Be assured, dear madam, that the shepherd shall again collect the lost sheep together, and this cloud of darkness pass away from our white-cliffed Albion."

The baroness shook her head mournfully.

"Never my son, never, by these eyes will the white cliffs of England be seen again; nor, I fear me, by yours my son. For sure I am, that if to choose between exile on earth and exile from heaven is to be our lot, to our faith we shall hold fast, though in the midst of penury and scorn: and this, Raymond, it is that makes me anxious now. The cloud that shuts from the light of heaven our much-loved country grows thicker and thicker. The powers of darkness are abroad. It is their time allotted of temporal triumph; and whilst that is, must we sojourn in a foreign land. Now hear me, Raymond. We are in this country, as you know, mere adventurers, with little but our bold hearts and a good name. If then your heart tells you—and truly tells you—that you can, without perfidy or dishonour, or falsifying that which ought to be as true as its prompter is pure—the language of affection—raise yourself to wealth and power, no mother's prejudices nor woman's whims shall forbid it. But have a care, Raymond: ambition dallies not with truth. That is all I ask."

At these words, the blood again mounted into the cheeks of the young man. He paused a moment, and then, looking his parent steadily in the face, went on,—

"I think, madam, you know me well enough to know, that I am no effeminate slave of fancy. I cannot and will not, as these Italians do, let my soul hang on the arch of a finely pencilled eyebrow, or the rosy softness of a woman's lip. With me, love must be allied to honour and to enterprise, or else, in my eyes, 'tis but the baseless dream of a

brain-sick girl, who would vainly centre all life in the childish rapture of an hour. Men reason not so : at least not such men as I am. Yet, dearest madam, surely it is superfluous to assure you, that to a Delancy, honour is, in every passage of our life, the all in all, and that I could no more deceive beauty than be deceived by it."

As he spoke thus, the young man rose, and with some agitation in his manner, strode across the apartment. Whatsoever it had been his intention to have added, faded, however, from his lips ; and returning to kiss the hand of the baroness which she tremblingly and tearfully extended to him, he quitted the room.

When Raymond, however, quitted his lady-mother, he could not leave behind the conflict of thoughts which her words had roused in his bosom. Full of agitated reflection, he sought the open air, as for refuge from the crowd of his own emotions and feelings ; and stepping into a light skiff, rigged and furnished in the English fashion, which lay moored in the canal, he pushed out into the Adriatic, and spreading his canvas to the breeze, reclined back immersed in thought ; leaving, as the light airs sometimes carried him forward, and sometimes all but deserted him, the stately palaces and quays and cupolas of the sea-girt city gradually behind.

"Yes !" thought he, "the baroness is right ! I shall never see benighted England again. All that makes life dear and beautiful ; my ancestral halls ; the fair and virtuous dames of my country ; her emerald fields ; her ivory cliffs ; the restless ocean that chafes around her ; her druid woods ; her stately cities and smiling villages, with all their baronial mansions and bold yeomanry ; I shall never behold them again. My lot is cast with the effeminate Italian, who shrinks from the sound of the war trumpet to listen to the lisps of the courtesan, and trembles at the hoarse murmur of the sea that he affects to wed. If then beauty, united to sense and sensibility, outstretches a hand to help me up the steeps of fortune, why should I hesitate ? Why suffer baseless scruples to cloud over smiles that are meant for me ; suffer a selfish fastidiousness to stand in the way of sympathy ; and starve

honour to death by an over-nice refining of its requirements? Where beauty smiles; where honour solicits; where wealth adorns; and where reason satisfies; it is hard indeed if the perversities of a fantastic logic are to be an overmatch for all!"

As thus the young man communed with his own indecision, he was borne along heedless of his own course, which was much like that of his ratiocination. Sometimes the breeze of a few minutes' duration would fill his sails, and the tinkling ripple of the skiff making way through the water come clearly upon his ear, amid the stillness which surrounded him. Anon, the gale would seem to faint and die away, and the sail would hang sluggishly down, until it became doubtful whether the boat moved or not amid the glassy element upon which it seemed becalmed. Equally irregular was the course of his thoughts. Now, ambition would assume the guise of love, and now honour whisper a faint rebuke to selfishness if it attempted to put on the disguise of passion; whilst again vanity would bring love in one hand and honour in the other, as meet companions; until cold reflection would again step in and arrest that light career, with shame in front and compunction behind; those cowering friends from which love shrinks in alarm and honesty in disgust.

Whilst the deeply sensitive, but also deeply reflective young man thus immersed himself in painful and conflicting thought, to which there seemed no end, and from which he saw no escape, he suddenly found himself under the shadow and in the close vicinity of one of those low shingly islets, at that period unoccupied, which lay towards the seaward extremity of the city, and were rarely trodden by human foot. Under the shadow of its shingly shore, he was for a moment becalmed, and the current would have carried his light shallop upon it, had not the resuscitated breeze sweeping suddenly over it again, caught the corner of the sail, and giving the skiff sudden way, brought her in a few minutes nearly to the extremity of the shelving isle. At this moment, the shadows of night were beginning to gather round the horizon. Evening had some little time before drawn her

filmy curtain over the sultry unmoving sky, and the darker drapery of the night was about to follow. The scene was solitary and lonely in the extreme. A light mist shadowed the lofty masses and towers of the city and almost concealed them. To the left, alone, standing out into the waters, was a huge mass of building; lofty, dark, and shapeless in the dim distance, save where here and there it caught a ray from the setting sun.

This massive pile, reared in the heavy architecture of a former age, was now and had long been a convent of monks of the stern order of the Carthusians. It had been of great extent and some wealth; but amidst the vicissitudes rising out of the feuds of the petty princes of Italy, and the varying and compromising policy of the popes, it had gradually lost much of its influence and splendour, and was now only partially occupied by the holy men whose habitation it was; consequently neglect and the elements had done their work upon the structure. Its exterior was worn and ruinous; and to a careless eye it might have seemed altogether deserted, so grim and mouldering was the exterior of the pile. Amid this now dim and voiceless solitude glided the skiff of the musing Raymond. Its loneliness was complete. Not a sail but his own was to be seen upon the brine, it being the vigil of San Antonio, when the rudest gondolier would hardly, during the hours of devotion, dip an oar in the water. Before him was the dim level of the Adriatic, upon which the mantle of the dark was fast stealing; on his right was the desolate, shingly islet, against which the green water sluggishly rippled; on his left was the dark mass of the ancient monastery, now only a towering pile of black shadow, floating as it were upon the broad lagoon amidst which it was founded. At this moment, just when clearing the extremity of the little islet, what seemed the faint, quick sound of oars caught the ear of the youth; and ere either party was well aware, a light boat glided obliquely, close across the course of the shallow, rowed with amazing rapidity, seemingly by a single arm.

The boat was of unique and singular appearance; and was

apparently of the build of those light skiffs, which are known, amongst the Ottomans, by the name of caïque. It was carved and ornamented after the same fashion, and glided rapidly over the waters, even with the impulse of a single arm. It was rowed by a slave, apparently from his complexion of Moorish origin; and in it sat a male figure, wrapped in a dark cloak after the Venetian mode, together with a veiled female. As soon as the proximity of a stranger was perceived, the sinewy rower plied his oars with redoubled strength. At this moment, however, the breeze which had so suddenly freshened with a sudden whirling gust blew aside the veil of the lady, and the boats were too close not to allow to the young Raymond a sight of the features, and partly of the figure of the fair voyager. Apparently somewhat, though not much above the middle size, her form was elegant, lithe, and sylph-like to the highest degree. Of the beauty of her face, it is impossible to convey an idea by words. In complexion, she seemed rather brown than fair. Her hair seemed of a dark rich brown; and the curved eyebrows and long eyelashes were darker than the hair. Her features, which were exquisitely chiselled, were hardly Italian, partaking a little of the Grecian. To regular beauty, they added an expression highly refined and intellectual, whilst the liquid fire of her dark eye threw over the whole contour of her face a charm and fascination, which might have penetrated less sensitive hearts than that of him who now gazed as he might have gazed had a goddess suddenly met his view. The sight was, however, only for a moment. Hastily snatching her veil, the beautiful apparition immediately interposed it between her glowing cheek and the eager look of the now impassioned and astonished young Englishman, who, thrown off his guard by the suddenness of the adventure, had let his shallop run before the wind instead of keeping her up to it.

This in a moment separated the two skiffs by several yards; and before Raymond had recovered self-possession, the caïque with its lovely freight was gliding rapidly in the direction of the huge pile of insulated building known as the Carthusian

convent. For a minute the youthful Englishman was bewildered betwixt curiosity and the dread of appearing to indulge it. What was this lovely being to him? or why, or with what semblance of courtesy, could he attempt to trace or ascertain her further course? After a short struggle, however, the fascination of beauty and the intense curiosity, thus suddenly roused, prevailed. Bringing his shallop near the wind, he now shot obliquely over towards the dark angle of the lofty pile, towards which the caique glided with great celerity. Night was now shadowing every object rapidly and densely; but this, by partly hiding his design, rather stimulated Raymond than the contrary. As the darkness fell the breeze freshened, and by the time the caique had neared the lofty angle of the pile farthest out to sea, the shallop of her pursuer was fast overtaking her. Those whom she carried, however, now aware of the youth's design, again redoubled their speed; and a few rapid strokes of her light glistening oars brought the little vessel sharply round the dark angle of the building. Raymond bringing his shallop, at the same moment, close to the wind, in a few seconds obtained a view round the angle of the pile where the caique had just passed. All was in dark shadow; and to his utter surprise no trace of her either by eye or ear was to be obtained. Coasting rapidly along the parallel made by the dark and frowning walls of the convent, he strained his eyes in vain. Nothing could he see; nothing could he hear but the ripple of the waves against the dark shore beneath the lofty walls of the ancient pile, which seemed desolate and devoid of inhabitants. Darkness had now dropped down upon the Adriatic; nor could the young Englishman, strong as was his nerve, and steady as was his courage, repress a feeling of superstitious awe, which the whole circumstances were calculated to inspire, and which stole upon him in spite of himself.

Putting about the helm of his skiff, and again taking advantage of the fresh breeze, he glided from beneath the darkly black shadow of the pile, and at a few toises' distance again lay to, and surveyed, as far as a few stars afforded a glim-

mering of light, the black range of building that now seemed growing out of the waters. All, however, was still as death, nor was there anything to show that living being had shelter there. Bewildered at length with conjectures that had no end, and with an undefined sense as it were of the presence of some strange mystery connected with what he had witnessed, the young man unwillingly bent his course, amid the deepening gloom, once more towards the sea-girt city.

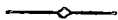
On reaching the mansion of his father he found Pietro the gondolier waiting his arrival, and the baroness in uneasiness at his delay. Making some plausible excuse, and pleading indisposition, he retired hastily to rest; but sleep was long scared from his eyelids. Feverish and excited by what had passed, he was haunted by the vision of the exquisite beauty of which he had obtained so brief a glimpse and lost so strangely. The impression of the form and face, which had so charmed him on the sudden, seemed now to be indelible; and if sleep for a moment closed his eyes, the whole scene became a dream, and he awoke bewildered and puzzled anew, until at length sheer weariness forced on a brief repose. He awoke as they awake who have struggled through a tossing night of wild and distressing visions, confused, and with a painful feeling of depression clinging uneasily to the mind. Even the beams of the cheerful morning were unable to dispel this feverish feeling. To the baroness, who, with the watchful eye of a mother, saw at once that he laboured under some morbid feeling, he still attributed his depression to lassitude and slight indisposition; and deeming that the open air and a change of scene would relieve him, he left the mansion, and summoning Pietro the gondolier, prepared to transact some business at the arsenal connected with his naval duties. The sight of Pietro, and his knowledge how little that was passing in the city of Venice escaped the notice of this trusty but observing race of men, led him to put some questions to the gondolier, thinking they might perhaps elicit something that might serve as a clue to an explanation of the singular circumstances of the preceding night. As he proceeded he could not help remarking that Pietro, in his turn, exhibited an ap-

pearance of excitement, which was increased when the worthy gondolier learned the quarter of the city in which the strange skiff had first been observed by Raymond. At last, on hearing from his young master that he lost sight of the caique and her freightage near the old Carthusian convent, the poor fellow's agitation became ungovernable. He crossed himself repeatedly on hearing these last circumstances, and turning very pale, exclaimed, "Holy Mary! protect us! but it is surely the wizard-skiff that your excellency has seen!"

It was now Raymond's turn to be astonished; and, after some cross-questioning he learned from Pietro that a legend was actually current amongst the class to which he belonged, of a mysterious skiff, rowed by a negro and steered by a man always wrapt in a Turkish cloak, which was sometimes seen about nightfall, but never could be traced beyond the Carthusian convent, near which it mysteriously vanished. Of a lady, nothing was said; nor did the young Englishman care to risk exposing, even to the eyes of the gondolier, the motive which really prompted him to make such inquiry.

Pietro's legend rather added to than decreased his bewilderment, and the interest he felt in circumstances so strange. That the simple boatman should believe in the supernatural origin of any unusual event, was no marvel in an age when such credulity prevailed all ranks of society, and when to express doubts as to the reality of such occurrences was by no means safe. The naturally strong and cool intellect of the young Englishman, however, altogether revolted from this hypothesis. He was quite aware that the city and state of Venice were full of intrigues, political plots, and cabals of every kind; and that devices of an extraordinary nature were sometimes resorted to to conceal them from the ever-jealous eyes of the Council of Ten and their subordinates and spies. How a young creature so beautiful and so juvenile as the female he had seen, should be involved in such transactions was, nevertheless, to him a mystery stranger than ever. Her appearance did not indicate her years to be more than seventeen or eighteen, and the mingled innocence, dignity, and intellect of her expressive features forbade at once the sup-

position that vice could have aught to do with such a being. Such were the thoughts that perplexed the mind of the young soldier: they would not be banished; and many days elapsed ere change of scene and the hurry of occupation repressed them for a time, or restored to him even the semblance of his wonted cheerful serenity of spirit.



CHAPTER VII.

THE CONFESSOR.

A FEW days after the adventure of Raymond Delancy near the ancient pile known as the Carthusian convent, and after that strange interview in the secluded council-room of the Palazzo Luchesini, found the handsome countess and the confessor seated in a small room, between a study and a library in appearance and garniture. It contained some richly carved black oaken cabinets of considerable height, which covered the walls almost entirely. A single tall window looking into the garden of the palace amply lighted it. It was covered with a rich thick carpet of dark pattern, apparently Turkish or Persian. The table and chairs were of richly carved oak, as were the cabinets. On the table stood writing materials; and where the cabinets were open, it might be seen that they contained some of the rarest and most costly books of the late Count Luchesini, numbers of vellum and parchment rolls, and various documents, such as might be expected to be found in the study of a man of letters and a statesman like the late count. Deeply let into the thick and massive wall there appeared to be a recess, with shelves and drawers lined with iron, and secured by a heavy iron door painted so as to resemble oak, and highly varnished, as were the cabinets. This seemed to be a place of security for such documents as its owner might deem to be of the highest importance; and in it were piled bundles of letters and parchments. At the table were seated the countess and

the confessor, before whom were placed a portfolio, and such materials as in that age were used by the scribe. The hour was an early one, even for the customs of that era. The countess was pale and jaded; and her eyes, and the appearance of lassitude in her whole demeanour, proved that she had been deprived of her usual rest, and agitated by emotions of a kind unusual enough to alter her general looks of cheerfulness and vivacity. The air of the confessor was very different. There was in his demeanour a repressed excitement which he could not totally hide under an affected appearance of deep and grave concern. It was evident in the occasional sparkle of his hard but still licentious eye, and in the occasional abstraction which seemed to take him from the immediate business that occupied him, and to lead him to revel, as it were, for a moment, in his own secret thoughts and inward imaginations. When unobserved, he might have been seen by a less occupied spectator, had such been present, to contemplate the pale but still beautiful features of his patroness in a way that ill accorded with the general reserve and studied distance of his behaviour. In short, it was evident that the mind of the padre was a theatre for conflicting ideas, discordant and incompatible, and which at times and for a moment he scarcely strove to control. The momentary silence was broken by the countess.

"You must own, father," said she, "that things begun with the best and most virtuous intentions may lead us into perils, from which a different line of conduct might have been free."

"You view this matter, daughter, too gloomily," replied the priest, in a tone which he meant for encouragement. "Besides, we must never forget that we ever have God and the saints in whom to trust."

"Had we so trusted at first, it might have been better, father," rejoined the countess, sadly.

"We must make use of means," replied the father. "In using such human means as God gives, and our reason, under his blessing, in using them (in saying which the priest crossed himself), we exhibit the Christian's trust, who is taught that endeavours holily made are themselves holy."

"We cannot," continued the confessor, "as professors of Christ's holy faith, wrap ourselves up in a hazy predestination, as infidel Turks do, that pronounce all endeavours vain. No, daughter, let us always remember that the Christian's life is a life of warfare!"

"The holy Virgin knows that I acted for the best," responded the lady.

"You did, dear daughter," replied the confessor, glancing beneath his eyebrows at her pale but eminently fine features. "Your situation was a peculiar one: you had wealth and rank. But, alas! in this sinful world are envy and self-seeking, and lust of that which is not our own; and with these wealth and station in the hands of an unprotected woman are too often fatal gifts, inviting spoliation and tempting to guile."

"It is too true," rejoined the beautiful countess with a sigh. "And therefore it was that, by a continuance of those services which the late Count Luchesini, my deceased lord, knew so well how to render, I sought to make friends amongst the magnates of the Republic and the rulers of her councils."

"And wisely did you so, daughter."

"Yet see to the brink of what a gulf it has led me," sighed the countess, turning still paler.

"Not so, daughter, not so," soothingly responded the confessor; "you view this, methinks, too gloomily."

"Alas! I cannot think so," said the lady. "If I fail to do that which I have undertaken, I become myself at once the object of suspicion, which, as we know too well, father, never sleeps in Venice. The sea itself is not more restless than are the jealousies of her councils—no! nor is it more treacherous."

"But we shall not fail, dear daughter."

"Father," rejoined the countess, in a low and stifled tone, "you know not that inscrutable man! Wily as the serpent; tameless as the wild horse of Araby; self-willed as the zebra of the desert, he deviates not from his path for a single instant, nor has an ear for other policy than his own;—nor is the wild

gazelle itself more watchful, suspicious, and awake when hidden enemies are in the path. Unless it be as the urgency of life and death, nothing, I fear, can bend him, nor induce him voluntarily to quit, even for a moment, a concealment which cannot be penetrated, and will not be foregone."

"Has he not the guarantee of the Church herself, sealed by oath on the sacred crucifix itself? Knows he not that?" asked the priest impatiently.

"He knows it, father."

"Then will he come, if the urgency you speak of, daughter, be placed before him."

"Who can insure the transmission of a missive so perilous?" demanded the countess agitatedly.

"Cannot it be in cipher?" was the suggestion of the father.

"The cipher itself begets suspicion; and what," after a pause, asked the countess, "does suspicion beget in Venice? Father, in that path lies destruction. Talk of it no more! Methinks the very heavens are lowering upon us," added the countess, looking fearfully towards the window.

The priest rose and slowly walked to the casement, looking upwards at the sky, which had, indeed, become suddenly overcast. After a minute's space he again seated himself and resumed the discourse.

"We talk, methinks, without counsel, daughter, which is neither meet nor well. What does *he* say, for by that we must be guided?"

Above the antique and richly chased stove by which the apartment when requisite was warmed, was fixed against the wall a small circular mirror of the finest convex Venetian glass, set in a massive frame of fancifully carved ebony, with an inner circle richly gilded in what is called "dead gold." Rising from her seat, the countess approached this mirror, and touching a spring it slowly left the wall, disclosing a small recess which appeared filled with various papers. From amidst these she selected a letter apparently writ in cipher, mixed with Arabic or some other oriental character, after glancing over which she translated a sentence or two.

"If you write in the last resort (said the letter), write not in cipher. Use your own language, but only use such phrases as may, whilst they seem ordinary and natural, be construed either way." "That," said the countess, "is *his* advice; but only (growing paler as she spoke) in the last resort."

"Take it then, daughter, if nothing else can be done," answered the padre encouragingly, "nor doubt of its success."

For a few minutes the beautiful countess sat silent, with the letter open in her hand, as pondering over its contents. At length, with the air of one who has made up her mind, she walked to the secret recess behind the antique mirror, replaced the letter, closed the recess, and sitting down at the table, signed to the confessor to place the writing materials before her.

As the priest obeyed her commands, an indifferent person might have seen a peculiar anxiety, mixed with secret satisfaction, in his manner, which all his habitual self-command failed entirely to veil. Bending submissively, he seemed to arrange with great care the paper for the countess; the tiny sheet on which she prepared to write being a mere filmy or gauzy tissue, such as the Chinese of that day alone could manufacture.

The countess again paused, and laying down the minute quill with which she was ready to write, again revolved on the step she was about to take; Father Momoro, as she did so, intently watching every movement. At length, having taken a final resolve, she resumed the pen, dipped it in the ink, and was applying it to the paper before her, when a gleam of lightning suddenly and vividly glanced across it, and a long, low, distant peal of thunder was distinctly audible, rattling along the surface of the Adriatic, and dying away slowly in the extreme distance.

"All-merciful Power!" exclaimed the countess, paler than ever, and dropping the pen from a trembling hand, "if it be thou speakest, teach thy creature how to interpret."

A gleam of something very like sarcasm passed across the

visage of the priest, not unmixed with anger. Recovering in an instant, however, the usual solemnity of his deportment—"Poor worms that we are," he said, in a stifled voice, "the whisper of God is heard, and straightway we think it is to our ear that it is directed! They, daughter," he added emphatically, "interpret God best who trust Him most!"

A slight colour mounted to the cheek of the lovely countess, and resuming at once the pen and her resolution, she wrote in minute characters on the thin slip which lay before her—

"LUDOLPHO,—I now write on urgency. Why should you hesitate? Why should you fear? By disobedience you destroy me, who only wish to serve the state; you destroy your own endeavour, which is to serve yourself, together with the state. Have you not the guarantee of our most holy faith and church—the depository of that faith—that obedience to this behest shall harm you not? What would you more! Think; and be contented, for this time, to be commanded by

"FIAMETTA LUCHESINI.

"Luchesini Palace."

In penning this scroll, the agitated countess did not perceive that the characters so writ were also faintly traced on the gauzy-textured sheet which lay beneath that on which she wrote. Father Momoro unconcernedly withdrew both, and immediately busied himself in reducing to the smallest compass the slip on which the countess had written. Taking up a seal-ring, which the lady had placed upon the table, preparatory to writing the scroll, he pressed with his nail upon a particular portion of the seal. It opened, and the thin paper, closely and artfully folded, was placed beneath the seal.

"I now, daughter, only await your final order for the transmission of this," he added, "through the usual trusty medium; and I beseech you to doubt not the event."

The countess bowed silently her acquiescence, and the

priest, replacing the writing materials carefully in the cabinet, left the room.

On being left alone, the inward agitation of the lovely countess was very apparent. She seemed buried in a world of thought. Sometimes she traversed the apartment with agitated steps; and sometimes sat with her head leaning upon her hand, apparently a prey to melancholy thoughts and still more bitter anticipations. As she communed with herself, her lips moved; and amid the violence and whirl of her feelings, her colour went and came, and her bosom heaved visibly.

"Why," she sometimes audibly asked herself in the tumult of her passions, "did I ever enter this fatal place, the scene of so many mysteries? Or why did my cruel destiny ever place me in the way of one who is himself a mystery, I fear me, of the darkest kind? He now, forsooth, refuses to trust himself within its walls. Would to heaven he had never so trusted himself! Why did I consent, when power unexpected and, the saints can witness, unsought for by me, was at length placed in my hands—why did I consent ever to involve myself in the web of intrigues, of which, I might have known, I should never see any happy termination? Was it to secure this wealth and station that Fantastic fortune has so strangely thrust upon me? Far better had I relinquished that wealth. Far better had I taken my chance in virtuous poverty, far from the vice and corruption of Venice, and its rulers, and its nobles, than live in gilded halls, the slave of fear and jealousy, afraid to acknowledge the dictates of my own heart, or to exhibit any feeling above those of heartless levity and luxurious selfishness, the ignoble passions of the titled crowd around me."

Such were the tumultuous regrets and self-accusations that tore the lovely bosom of one formed for better aspirations. It was in vain that the countess, through many hours, struggled to regain her wonted serenity of manner. Her anxiety and agitation could not be repressed. She gave orders to be denied, under plea of indisposition, to all comers; and ascending from room to room of the princely building, of

which the caprice of fortune had now made her sole mistress, she tried by various occupations to beguile the suspense and misgiving that harassed her. In this condition of mental torture she had now been for some hours, when her ear was suddenly filled by a discharge of distant artillery. The boom of gun after gun in dim echoes rolled audibly past the trembling casements of the apartment in which she sat. In sudden excitement she sprang to the window and opened the lattice. The sounds were more distinct; and they were apparently those of a salvo of artillery fired from the arsenal, as for some rejoicing. Seizing a bell, the countess at once summoned an attendant.

"What mean these sounds?" she eagerly asked, vainly struggling to repress her inward trepidation. "They are rejoicing, please your ladyship, for something at the arsenal: some news from the fleet, the gondoliers say."

"Send out instantly, Letta, and learn the particulars," exclaimed the countess. "Tarry not a moment—let me know as soon as possible."

The attendant hastily left the room, whilst her mistress, throwing herself upon a couch, eagerly, and with a throbbing heart and heaving bosom, torn with conflicting hopes and fears, listened to the distant sounds.

Again they redoubled. A salvo was fired apparently from St. Mark's, or some nearer part of the ocean-city. The agitation of the countess increased, and a faintness almost overcame her, such was the war of inward emotion, when the attendant again entered the room.

"It is great news, your excellenza, from the admirals Grandenigo and Delancy. They have burned so many galleys of the Turks as never yet was heard of!"

"Are you sure of this, Letta?" demanded the countess, now thoroughly excited; "who told your messenger the news?"

"The Senator Bembo, signora," replied Letta, half in a pet to be doubted on such an occasion. "He was going to the signory to hear more particulars; and he sends, in the meantime," added Letta, "his—his—congratulations, I think it was, on the event."

The countess, heedless of the implied satire the word conveyed, motioned her attendant to leave her ; and no sooner did she feel herself alone than she dropped upon her knees, panting with emotion and the sudden revulsion of her feelings.

“ Thanks to God, all merciful ! ” exclaimed she ; “ he will now come ; and I am safe ! ”

A happy change had now come over the demeanour of the beautiful countess. The traces of anxiety and restlessness, which before marred the expression even of her fair countenance, had fled with the cause which created them. She now no longer feared the disobedience to her urgent wishes of the mysterious personage with whom she was in communication. She was well aware that the advantage gained (whatever might be its real extent) over the deadly foe of the Republic, the Ottoman, arose in some part out of intelligence obtained through the mysterious Ludolpho ; and that, whatever the fears and jealousies of the council had been, they must now be lulled. Consequently, her eyes now beamed her inward satisfaction as brilliantly as wont ; and that fascination of manner, which at times was so irresistible, she was now prepared to exercise in all its strength : in short, the beautiful countess was again herself.

It was shortly seen that some preparations within the Palace Luchesini, of an unusual nature, were making. They went on, however, in that wing of the extensive building which generally was least used. Whatever guests were expected, they were not ordinary guests. To this *quasi* secrecy with regard to occasional receptions, however, the inmates of the palazzo had been long accustomed. During the lifetime of the late count they were frequent events. Immersed in political and state intrigues of all kinds, he only occasionally received as ordinary guests the magnates and nobles of luxurious Venice ; his agents, however, secret or semi-secret, had frequent access and at all hours. Such was the life of an Italian politician of the era. His beautiful young widow had, during his latter years, borne her share in these transactions, and had been in a manner compelled by

circumstances to continue them. Such preparations as she now ordered to be made, excited, therefore, neither the wonder nor remark of her numerous retinue of domestics and dependants. In the eyes alone of the confessor, Father Momoro, might be noticed a restless mixture of curiosity and cunning, which that guarded personage seldom exhibited; and which in the time of the deceased count he would not have dared to exhibit, however slightly or transiently. He who was at all trusted by the late Count Luchesini must have either felt or feigned an inability to pry further than he was trusted. With the present owner of the palace the padre found that he could venture somewhat further; and he did so.

In the midst of these occupations of the Countess Luchesini, the arrival of the Baroness Delancy was unexpectedly announced. Between these two ladies, in many respects so similar, a strong feeling of friendship and confidence had now grown up. In mind and in accomplishments they were considerably alike. True it was that the once commanding beauty of the noble English lady had been deteriorated deeply by anxieties and sorrows; and with her graces of form and face, her elasticity of spirits, never equal to that of the fair Italian, had left her. Both in manners and accomplishments, nevertheless, she was still striking, and sometimes even fascinating; and to her feelings in favour of the fair Countess Luchesini, the now manifest predilection of that rich and beautiful woman for her son Raymond Delancy had, perhaps unconsciously on the part of the baroness, added much. Nor was this to be wondered at. Upon her son Raymond the Baroness Delancy really doted. He was her only child; and her feelings for him seemed to be mixed up with reminiscences that added intensity even to the maternal feeling, at all times so strong. Sojourners as they both now were amidst foreigners, her husband absent and uncertain of return, he seemed to be all that reminded her of England; and the melancholy that attended these reflections added, as is often the case, to their force.

The news which had arrived, was of course a matter of

some excitement to the baroness. In the same service, her son had lately been wounded; and now her husband was again risking his life in the service of the Venetian state. To the countess, whose means of information she knew, she naturally came at a moment to her and her son so interesting; and although evening was now rapidly approaching, her presence was announced to her beautiful friend, and in some sort protectress; for to the good offices of the countess, it was believed by most, that the employment by the rulers of the Republic of the English Baron Delancy, was to be in part attributed.

On the arrival of the Baroness Delancy at the palace Luchesini, she was conducted, as the intimate friend of its owner, to the wing of the building in which the countess then was. After a short interview, the countess having acquainted her friend with the real import of the intelligence received—which public rumours had, as usual, considerably magnified—pleaded occupation for a short period, during which she requested the English lady to rest and refresh herself. To this proposal the baroness, feeling fatigue as well as anxiety, readily acceded, leaving her accomplished friend to attend to the preparations, whatever they might be, with which she was intently occupied.

The apartment to which the Lady Delancy was now ushered was in a part of the palace to which hitherto she had been a stranger. It was narrow, and had more the appearance of an anti-chamber than of any more important apartment. It was lighted by a single casement at the end, which was much shut in by the trees that grew within a few feet of it; and, whilst they shaded the room, precluded any view from it. The apartment itself was plain, and seemed to have been little used. The door was singularly massive; and up to the ceiling, which was carved in the cumbrous style prevalent a century before, the walls were covered with panelling, grotesquely but deeply carved also, and almost black with age. On one side of the room was an open stove, somewhat in the English fashion; and opposite stood a couch or sofa of great size, of grotesquely carved, and dark wood,

similar to the panelling of the lofty walls and heavy ceiling, covered with some strong but faded tissue of a deep crimson colour. A few antique high-backed chairs with arms, and a heavy but small table, completed the furniture of the place, which, to say the truth, accorded ill, in its fittings, with the splendour of the more inhabited parts of the pile.

Having rested on the couch and partaken of some slight refreshment which had been placed before her, the baroness began to feel that listlessness which the sultry air of an ill-ventilated room, joined to a little fatigue, is apt to produce. The time seemed to limp tediously. She was still alone, and the shades of evening were rapidly darkening the apartment. Overcome with the stillness, the gloom, and the sultriness of the atmosphere, she had felt almost inclined to sleep; and reclining back, was unconsciously yielding to its approaches, when she was roused by a slight noise, apparently within the panels that covered the wall behind her; and her attention was attracted by a glimmering light on the side of the room opposite to the couch where she sat. It was reflected by a square mirror of large size, such as at that era Venice alone could produce, and which was set in the panelled wall, at some little height above the old-fashioned open stove. It seemed strongly framed with the same dark carved wood that formed the panels on each side, and from the general gloom of the room, easily escaped notice.

As the baroness, somewhat startled, gazed at the glimmering light that played upon the face of the mirror, but whence derived she could not perceive, the light slowly and gradually increased in brightness and steadiness, and exhibited to the astonished Lady Delancy the distinct reflection of the interior of some other apartment; the first glance of which riveted her eyes upon the spot, so strange and horribly vivid were the recollections excited by it.

Distinctly reflected upon the face of the mirror, was the whole interior of what seemed a room of no small size. Its furnishings seemed antique in the extreme. The walls were covered with dark, heavy, wooden panels; which constant rubbing, however, or some other device, had rendered so bright, that

they reflected back the light with considerable vividness. This apartment seemed to be lighted by day by four tall narrow windows, which, from the thickness of the walls of the building, must have admitted but an imperfect light, but which now were entirely dark. At one end of the room, upon a black marble hearth, stood an antique brazen grate or censer, upon which wood might occasionally be burned. The chimney above this hearth was heavily ornamented by carved work, which was supported by two figures, similar to those allegorical idols which are met with in the East throughout the tract known as India. Above the carved work hung a portrait, rudely and roughly, but most forcibly painted. It represented an old man, with hair and beard nearly white, in the dress, and of the complexion of a Persian. It was fixed in a massive carved wooden frame, surmounted by a gilded pyre or tongue of flame as a symbol. At the side of the room, opposite the narrow windows, stood a short pillar or altar, apparently of black marble, upon which stood an antique lamp, burning with a silvery bright flame. At the further end of the room was an alcove, also ornamented with rich but grotesque carving, in which stood a bed or couch, richly draped with curtains of a flame colour, relieved by dark fringes of some heavy tissue; and in the midst of the room was a heavy table, with clawed feet, on which lay what seemed to be parchment or paper scrolls, and various mathematical instruments. A few antique chairs, and a carpet of rich matting, thickly woven in colours, completed the furniture of the place.

In the midst of the apartment, seemed to be pacing slowly the figure of a man clothed in black, after the Venetian fashion of the time. His height was about the middle size, but the singular liteness and lightness of his form, reminded more of the oriental than the European. It was, however, elegant and symmetrical; and his step, as he paced slowly and thoughtfully, at times stopping, was light and graceful as that of the Indian hunter.

Upon this sudden and strange apparition, the English baroness gazed with sensations quite indescribable. Except-

ing a nervous tremor that pervaded her whole frame, she seemed petrified by her own feelings of astonishment or horror. She uttered neither word nor cry, but stood fixedly gazing, as if fascinated by some spell, on the scene before her. At length the moving figure, appearing to reach the extremity of the room, paused for a few seconds, looking fixedly at the curtained alcove and couch which occupied it. He then turned slowly round; when his features were distinctly shown by the light thrown upon the whole scene.

He seemed to be a man of forty-six or forty-seven years of age. His hair was coal-black, and hung in massive curls. His complexion was dark, even for an Italian, and seemed that of a man inured to many climates. His features, however, were very noble. His beard was dark, as was his hair, and cut after the Venetian fashion. The expression of his finely cut features was nevertheless very peculiar. They gave an idea of stern and deep abstraction taken alone; but from under their dark eyebrows, his eyes shot unusual brilliancy. Their light was a mingled one. It seemed that of keen intellect, wildness, and a deep sensibility, whilst the full red lip, and ivory white teeth like those of an Indian, gave to the whole expression of the face an air of daring license that accorded strangely with the deep abstraction of the lofty brow, and sometimes of the eyes beneath it. The whole conveyed the idea of the sublimated passions of youth joined to the profound intellect of age, and impressed with awe as much as admiration.

Such was the remarkable apparition that met the gaze of the petrified Baroness Delaney. Until then, terror or wonder seemed to have frozen her utterance; but on seeing the features of the apparition, which were distinctly and strongly reflected, she gasped as for breath, uttered a faint but piercing shriek, and dropped senseless upon the floor.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RASH AVOWAL.

ON recovering from her swoon, which she did after a long and agonizing struggle, as from some terrible dream or nightmare which seems to steep the whole faculties in horror, the baroness found herself stretched upon a couch in the opposite wing of the palace, and surrounded by the Countess Luchisini, the Father Momoro (who it seemed had entered the room in which she fainted soon after), her son Raymond, and the learned leech, Doctor Michelli. The physician, assisted by a servant, was employed in binding up her arm, from which he had drawn a few ounces of blood, whilst the alarmed countess was bathing her temples with some stimulant but cooling and scented liquid, and whilst her son occasionally applied to her nostrils a silver phial containing some similar stimulant.

On the baroness opening her eyes, an exclamation of gratitude and fear relieved burst simultaneously from the lips of the countess and Raymond; but this was immediately silenced by Doctor Michelli, who, by an expressive gesture, gave those around to understand that for the present the patient must not be disturbed even by a whisper, nor alarmed by the slightest allusion to what had occurred. The same caution was conveyed to the suffering baroness as soon as her faculties were rallied sufficiently to enable her to apprehend it. Rest, after some little refreshment had been quietly administered to the patient, was recommended by Doctor Michelli; who, after a small portion of wine had been given under his inspection to the suffering lady, ordered her to be conveyed to bed with as little disturbance as possible, whilst he remained within call, in case of any relapse or material alteration in the state of the patient, whose nervous system had received a shock, as he conceived, of a perilous nature.

Upon rest, quiet, and total silence for the present, he insisted; and giving some directions as to diet, quitted the room, evidently impressed with the persuasion that his patient was in a position of some risk.

As to the cause which had produced an effect so alarming upon the already valetudinarian English lady, all were in perfect ignorance. The first alarm had been given by the confessor, who entering the secluded room accidentally, as he said, found the baroness in that state of insensibility from which she was with much difficulty recovered. The countess, apprised of what had happened, had her immediately removed to the inhabited wing of the palace, and a messenger dispatched to the worthy leech, Doctor Michelli, who with difficulty succeeded in rescuing the baroness from the state of deep collapse into which she had been thrown.

In the meantime, the young Raymond Delancy, hearing of the arrival of news from the Venetian fleet, had promptly proceeded to the harbour to inquire after dispatches from his father, which he reasonably looked to find. In this he was not disappointed. The vessel which had brought home the dispatches to the council of the Republic had also brought two short missives from the Baron Delancy for the baroness and for himself. On securing these welcome tidings, he had followed the baroness to the Luchesini palace, only to find her in a state more like that of death than of life. The baron's letter to her son was short and technical. It merely stated his own safety; and then proceeded to detail to young Raymond the leading particulars of a night-action, in the course of which the Venetian admirals were enabled, by means of secret information received from the council at home as to the plans of the Ottomans, to anticipate a night-attack, burn three of their galleys, drive three more ashore, and so disperse the rest as totally to suspend for the present any danger from their hostile operations. This was the substance of the brief and technical letter written by his father to Raymond, after the confusion of a naval action fought chiefly by the light of the burning galleys of the Turks.

To the beautiful countess, who eagerly listened to the brief

detail, it bore an interest beyond that felt by any other person. She was conscious that to her the Doge and the councils were really indebted for the intelligence of which so excellent a use had been made. It was true the extent of the victory achieved by the Venetian navy was exaggerated vastly, as always is the case, by public rumour. It was, however, considerable, and occurred at a critical moment. Thus she felt that her credit and influence at the signory were now stronger than ever. She had met their suspicions, vague as they were, by services that could not be gainsaid nor denied. She had met their requirements frankly and openly; and the fruits of her exertions to serve the Republic, through the means employed by her late husband the Count Luchesini, were now before them. In the accession of popularity thus given to the name of Delancy she felt an interest far deeper than she dared to confess to herself.

The short but graphic sketch of the young Raymond Delancy was, therefore, as nectar to her ears, so sweetly did it sound when delivered from a tongue naturally musical, and now made infinitely more so by the grace and enthusiasm of the speaker. She felt as if she could have listened without end to such a tale so told. Anxiety for the suffering baroness, however, cut this enjoyment short for the moment. It was necessary that, until composure was restored, constant watch should be kept; for to total insensibility, nervous feverishness and frequent agitated wanderings of the mind succeeded. For the present, therefore, the countess refused to leave, except at intervals, the chamber of her friend, leaving Raymond to his own reflections or the converse of the confessor.

Whilst his parent remained in a state apparently critical, however, the young man was little fitted for converse of any kind. His mind was filled with conflicting thoughts, which rapidly succeeded each other. The extraordinary attack which his parent had experienced shocked and astonished him. The almost filial attention paid by the countess to the suffering baroness wrought deeply upon his best feelings, for to his parent he was devotedly attached. The new laurels

gained by his father from the Ottomans again roused an ambition of distinction which lay deep within him, masked only by a modest and generally somewhat reserved exterior. A confused dream of glory and power floated in his mind, which no whisperings of misgiving enabled him to dissipate. Fate on a sudden seemed to be weaving a web in which, young as he was, and a sojourner amongst strangers, he as it were felt himself to be still involved. From this mixture of feelings and anticipations he found no present escape; and immersed in thoughts which crowded into his mind in spite of himself, he paced an anti-chamber, now listening to accounts of his parent's state, and now given up to the musings of an imagination not, perhaps, easily wrought upon, but when stirred, vivid, restless, and uncontrollable.

At length this suspense was for the moment happily removed. Some anodynes, administered by the care and skill of Doctor Michelli, had produced the relief intended. From a state of perturbed feverishness and nervous agitation, the exhausted baroness gradually sank into quiescence, followed by a natural and tranquil sleep. This sleep, the worthy leech impressed upon the attendants, was likely to last several hours, and must not on any account be interrupted. It was critical; and the welfare, mentally and bodily, of the patient might depend upon it. Stationing, therefore, a tried and trusty nurse at the bed-side of the sleeping baroness, with proper instructions and orders, the countess at length left the couch of her suffering guest and again joined Raymond, to whom she imparted the favourable tidings of his parent's improved state; and with whom, now relieved from anxiety, she prepared to partake of some slight refreshment. To say that the youth was happy to accede to such an invitation was needless. His anxiety for the immediate safety of his lady mother once removed, he could pleasurablely appreciate both the deep interest which the countess showed in her welfare, and the undisguised delight with which she dwelt upon his narrative of the exploits of his gallant father the Baron Delancy; and full of these feelings, it was with a mixture of pride and pleasure that he accompanied his charming hostess

to the saloon in which a slight but elegant refection awaited them.

It is hardly necessary to say that the events of the last twelve hours had also greatly wrought upon the feelings of the beautiful woman whose guest the youthful Raymond now was, and with whom he now sat alone. The earlier hours of that day had been spent by her in a state of agonizing suspense, mixed with undefined dread of dangers impending of unknown extent and nature. It was a trial for the nerve of the most resolute man, and of course much more so for a deeply sensitive, amiable, and accomplished woman, raised by fortune from obscurity to a giddy splendour—admired by many, envied by more, and feared and hated by some, whose insolence she had checked, or whose licentiousness she had disappointed. This state of torturing suspense had been, as it were by the interposition of a favouring providence, at once dissipated, and a sudden revulsion of feelings, strained to the utmost, benignantly vouchsafed. To this had succeeded the mysterious and sudden illness of the interesting but invalid Baroness Delancy; to which again had been added the relief derived from the successful exertions and now cheering anticipations of Doctor Michelli, and the secret but intense pleasure she derived from the undisguised delight of young Raymond, when to his pride in the success of one parent was added satisfaction in the safety of the other.

That the state of mingled but pleasurable excitement into which this singular combination of bitter with sweet threw the handsome countess added to her wonted fascination, need not be doubted. The sight of a beautiful woman must always potently act upon the young of the opposite sex; but the spectacle of an exquisitely beauteous female, thrown partly off her guard and roused to the utmost of pleased excitement by some unexpected happiness, he must be a stoic indeed who can behold unmoved.

The young man who now sat by her was certainly no such stoic. Under a somewhat cool and stern exterior, and under much power of reflection, he veiled strong passion; not

easily excited, but, when excited, honest and single. To a young man so constituted, the being with whom he was now brought into trying companionship offered no ordinary incitements. The mingled and varied emotions to which she had been through so many hours exposed, and to which she had found a conclusion on the whole so fortunate, had given her unusual animation. The personal exertion she had been compelled to make had lent to her cheek a heightened glow; and the sudden transition from torturing anxiety to triumph, and from anxiety to pleasurable anticipation, had imparted a diamond lustre to her ever-brilliant eyes. To the graces of her fine figure and the ease of her movements the tumult of her feelings had given additional animation. In short, never probably had this charming woman seemed more charming, nor ever been more prepared by nature and by art to act upon the passions of a youth as yet inexperienced in the force of female fascinations, or in the potency of the combined charm of matured beauty set off by intellectual refinement. To all this even a sort of negligence of dress contributed to aid. In the hurry of attendance on the suffering baroness the glossy curls of the countess had slightly escaped from the comb which confined them, and the silken veil, guarded by the finest lace, which shrouded her bosom, had been partially disarranged.

These graceful negligences only added, however, to the fascinating *tout ensemble* of the being upon whom the enthusiastic Raymond Delaney now gazed; and what marvel can be felt that such a sight partially overset the faculties of him who beheld it? Everything conspired, or seemed to do so, to induce the now excitable young man to yield to such a spell. His feelings of gratitude for the almost filial tenderness towards his suffering parent exhibited by the countess; the latent stirrings of ambition which whispered to him how fair a hand might hand him up to fame and honour; the excitement of his father's victory over the Ottomans; the delicious stillness of the hour and place after the salvos of cannon and shouts of triumph which had echoed over the city, added to the beaming beauty of his seductive and too

partial hostess, formed a combination that put his senses in a whirl, and obliterated everything but the fascination of the hour. His mysterious adventure with the skiff near the ancient convent of the Carthusians, and those enchanting features of which he had obtained so hasty a glimpse, were for the moment buried in that obliviousness of all beside, which such a scene alone as that in which he was now an actor can produce in a powerful mind. In the siren before him he saw the whole world for the moment centred. The beautiful Fiametta, now Countess Luchisini, seemed mistress of his destinies, and with his destinies, of his heart. Everything seemed to say that she ought to be his, and his only. As he gazed upon her in a delirium of passion, she appeared a goddess drawing him by some supernatural spell to be her votary and worshipper. What marvel, then, that, overcome at last by the irresistible influence of such an hour, he fell at her feet, or sealed passionate vows with kisses as passionate? Let those blame him who, in the flaming days of inexperienced youth, have never been in the presence of blushing and consenting beauty; or have never known what it was to be assailed at once by ambition, gratitude, and successful love.

Such scenes as those during which the young and enraptured Raymond, bound, as he believed, his destinies to those of the beautiful Fiametta Countess Luchisini, can only be transient. Amidst all the triumph of her charms, and secret joy of a heart that had never known rapture till then, the amiable countess felt a secret monitor that whispered her that the step now taken and past recall was in truth rash and unadvised. This revulsion of feeling, slight as it was, she did not wish her youthful adorer to perceive. She accordingly felt it was time the interview should end. The very lateness of the hour imperatively demanded it; and having conveyed her wishes to the enraptured young man, he was, in unwilling but implicit obedience, kissing the fair hand now willingly abandoned to him, when the door slowly swung upon its hinges, and the sinister visage of the confessor protruded itself into the room.

It is impossible for pen to describe the demoniac charge upon the generally moveless features of this man which the sight of the Countess and Raymond Delaney momentarily produced. The visage of the monk turned hideously pale, and his ashen lips quivered with some inward passion quite uncontrollable, whilst from his usually small hard eye glared a flash of jealous rage—the entire expression of the face being wrung so utterly apart from its general lineaments, that it almost amounted to that appalling disfigurement caused by the cramps and twists of epilepsy, or the silent wrench of paralysis. The spasm, however, was only temporary. Recovering by a violent effort an appearance of composure, and with difficulty forcing his tones into the level coolness of bitter sarcasm,—“I crave pardon, signora,” he said, “for an intrusion quite involuntary. I am mistaken, and I see my mistake. Methought wisdom and prudence had governed here, and not their opposites!” And so saying, the priest, with a formal bend, again closed the door and left the room.

At these insolent words the countenance of the young Englishman, in his turn, became blanched with sudden passion; and he was proceeding rapidly to the door of the apartment to recall the intrusive priest, when the countess interposed. It was easy to gather from the expression of her features that surprise: the behaviour of the priest contended with anger mixed with some alarm. In a moment, however, she recovered her usual radiant dignity of demeanour. “Leave this matter to me,” she said with perfect calmness, appealing authoritatively to her young lover. “It is for me to govern my own house, and those whom I select as its inmates; not to see that kindness and consideration are not repaid by insolence and ingratitude in any.” With these words, summoning an attendant, she retired to make her final enquiries as to the state of the suffering baroness; the result of which she promised to send to young Raymond ere he retired to rest.

The baroness still continued in that state of quiet but somewhat heavy sleep into which she had fallen after the shock upon the nerves which she had experienced had sub-

sided and expended its terrible force. So far all cause of immediate uneasiness was removed, but this assurance by no means insured rest either to the amiable Countess Luchesini or to her young admirer. It was in vain the lady invoked sleep to rest upon her feverish eyelids. Either he came not at all or in company with wild and confused visions of the night, from which the sleeper started, sometimes in surprise, and sometimes in agitated alarm. The vicissitudes and emotions of the preceding day had too much oppressed the nerves to permit them to rest even in sleep; and hence her dreams were melancholy as well as wild. At one time she found herself in a far country, where in some dim chapel of some secluded neglected castle, the hollow voice of the Cardinal Santa-Croce seemed saying mass for the departed soul of Raymond Delancy. Again she slumbered, and there arose before her an Indian pile, upon which lay a corpse with a youthful widow weeping over it; that widow being the sister of Raymond, and the body that of her brother.

Starting in agitation from distorted visions like these, the perturbed lady at last forbore to sleep, and, pondering over the events of the preceding hours, painfully watched for the welcome rays of the morning. The repose of her youthful lover was similarly disturbed. Of the radiant lady in whose palace he now was, he dreamed; but the dreams were wild and changeful. Now he was again at the feet of the beautiful countess, but on gazing in her face it seemed changed to that of the mysterious and sylph-like being so strangely seen and lost near the ruined pile of the Carthusian monastery. Again he dreamed his mother was dead and lay stretched upon her bier in the chapel of the Luchesini Palace, when the Countess Luchesini approaching the body took from its finger the wedding-ring and placed it on her own; and on Raymond's trying to withdraw it, he could not, so firmly did it seem fixed, until his vain efforts were interrupted by a fiendish laugh, like that of the Confessor Momoro, who, with his livid lips and glazing eyes, seemed standing behind the altar. Such were incoherent visions that troubled the perturbed sleep of the young Englishman, until put to flight by the

cheerful beams of the morning as they glittered over the golden level of the Adriatic.

Long ere Raymond, however, left his perturbed couch, the fair countess had risen, and in her own oratory offered up her morning devotions. An unusual weight hung upon her spirits. She felt as if her destiny was now in some way connected with that of the young and accomplished Raymond Delaney; but secret misgivings haunted her mind as to whether the step she seemed about to take might be in its event propitious. Immersed in thought, she hesitated and pondered; and at length summoning an attendant, ordered him to communicate to Father Momoro her desire for his presence. His strange demeanour, a few hours before, had added to the perturbation of mind which so many singular events had conspired to create; and from the padre himself she resolved to seek an explanation.

The confessor entered the oratory with that sleek humility of deportment, which on certain occasions he knew so well how to assume, however ill it might accord with his real feelings; and bestowing on his fair patroness that blessing which custom demanded from him, he stood in humble attitude as awaiting her commands.

The countess commenced the conversation.

"Father," said she, in a firm and resolved tone, "I think to the teaching of the Church, and to such censures as its ministers must pass upon some of the deeds or thoughts of frail creatures, you have never found me indifferent."

"I have not, daughter; and blamable indeed would he be who should hazard such an imputation," was the reply of the padre.

"I thank God and the blessed Virgin that it is so," was the humble rejoinder of the countess.

"All blessings come from God," said the padre, "and it is by grace only that we can be said to deserve them."

"That such grace be granted me, I pray the immaculate mother to intercede in my behalf," reiterated the countess; "and when found unworthy, may the ministrations of holy Church help to heal the sin."

"It is the Church's office," said the padre.

"It is so, and a blessed one," calmly rejoined the countess; "but still there are actions indifferent, in which we must be left to our own judgments and better inclinations."

"Undoubtedly," said the confessor, with an air of much humility.

"On such," continued the countess, "also, we may need advice."

"It may be so," was the guarded reply.

"Surely; and when felt to be so needed, assure yourself, father, I shall in all cases ask it," was the marked rejoinder.

The priest changed colour; but with that affectation of humility that, to him, had become a second nature in certain situations, he went on—

"Daughter," said the priest in a low tone, "I shall not affect to misunderstand the allusion, nor yet the circumstance, and, if ever I have overstepped the sacred bounds of my office, believe me, it has only been because it seemed to me, indebted as I was to the favour of the late master of this mansion, to be my duty not to withhold counsel when I believe it to be of vital import to one justly endeared to him; and if I now overstep that limit, the motive is the same."

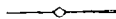
"I beg you to be candid, holy father," said the countess.

"I shall be so, daughter," said the confessor, gravely; "and having done my duty, gladly quit the subject for ever. I shall not, daughter, affect not to see that which is already perhaps too manifest to too many eyes—I mean your predilection for the young Englishman Delaney, and the favour with which you regard his whole family."

"And are these things blamable, supposing them to be as you please to state them, father?" asked the countess with some asperity.

"God forbid! dear daughter," responded the priest. "God forbid that any blame should attend virtuous attachment, or kindness to those who, once powerful in their own land, are exiles from it for the sake of Christ's holy Church. But that which religion forbears to blame, prudence cannot always ratify. In a sinful world virtue has many perils which pru-

dence and charity lesson us to avoid. Now, mark me, dear daughter: you know—none better—this state of Venice; the jealousy of its councils; the struggles of its nobles; the artificial nature of its whole power, and of the wondrous machinery on which that power rests. Reflect upon this, and reflection will teach you, daughter, as it has taught me, that the Council of Ten would see the Countess Luchisini and her wealth and influence in the hands of the profligate and intriguing Bembo; nay, in the hands of the powerful Spinelli; rather than delivered over to a foreigner, and a noble of that land the enterprise of whose sons begins to be more serious to Venice than that of the grasping Spainard or the reckless Portuguese. Do not answer me; but reflect, and reflect well on this, whilst you yet have time;” and with these words the confessor with a low and humble obeisance, quitted the oratory, leaving his noble patroness to her meditations.



CHAPTER IX.

THE RESCUE.

SOME days had now elapsed since the mysterious illness of the Baroness Delancy. During the whole interval, the countess had attended upon her with the tender assiduity of a daughter or a sister; and when she was well enough to be removed to her own house, had extended thither the kindness and carefulness which were so conspicuous whilst the suffering baroness was under her roof. During this period, the progress which the attentions of the young Raymond were making on the affections of the amiable and lovely countess was manifest to those who had the opportunity of observing them. From the maternal gaze of the Baroness Delancy this could not, of course, be concealed; and as the young man's suit was favoured by her, the friendship betwixt the baroness and her friend was thus more firmly cemented than it had ever yet been.

Still, however, no communication on the subject of the sudden indisposition of the former had ever passed between them. The injunction of Doctor Michelli as to the risk of any recurrence to the topic had up to this time sealed the lips of the countess. Nor was the baroness herself inclined to advert to the topic. With regard to the extraordinary occurrence in that secluded room of the deserted wing of the Palace Luchesini she was in a state of bewilderment. The circumstances which led to her fainting she perfectly recollected; for they were too vividly and intensely impressed upon her mind to be forgotten: but still she knew not whether to attribute them to the strength of her own imagination acting upon weak nerves, or to some sudden and temporary hallucination of mind. Real she could not conceive the appearances to be; and, under this uncertainty, she was averse to mentioning them even to the countess, to whom such a detail might be disagreeable without being in any way or by any possibility beneficial. A similar taciturnity was observed by the countess, who religiously adhering to the warning of the good physician Michelli, had resolved never voluntarily to allude to the circumstance, the mystery of which, however, somewhat excited her curiosity. To these resolves taken by each both ladies had adhered; and although the baroness was now quite convalescent, and able to see or receive company as usual, no allusion even the most remote had been made by any to her recent indisposition.

On the occasion to which we now advert, the countess had paid a visit of ordinary courtesy to her friend. The advances made by Raymond to the former lady were neither unknown to nor disapproved of by his parent; and this had still farther cemented a friendship which, from the first, feelings of strong sympathy between these two noble and beautiful females had created. Both were singularly accomplished for the age in which they lived. Their pursuits were consequently often similar; and the adversity against which the suffering baroness now had to contend, only endeared her to the fair and amiable Countess Luchesini, who had herself known vicissitudes. After some conversation on

the events of the hour, the countess was about taking leave of her fair friend, when they were interrupted by the entrance of the Senator Bembo.

"Saints forbid that I should be interrupting a tête-à-tête!" said the senator, on his entering with his usual assumption of gaiety, when his real feelings were the reverse.

"Console yourself, senator," replied the baroness courteously; "your interruption, we can assure you, is a perfectly welcome one."

"It certainly ought to be so," gravely responded the senator.

"Indeed!" echoed both ladies at once.

"Ay, indeed! seeing that my errand is to offer my congratulations on an event in which one of you at least must feel a maternal interest."

There was a slight sarcastic emphasis in the manner in which Bembo pronounced the word "maternal."

"Pray, then, spare us suspense," said the countess gaily, who was by no means insensible to the hidden shaft of the senator, but chose to meet it lightly,—"maternal feelings are not to be trifled with!"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the senator. "The news I have to tell relates to the young Baron Delancy, whom it has pleased the Council, in consideration of his acknowledged services and known skill and bravery, to select for the command of a light squadron to cruise against the Turk and protect our Venetian commerce. To you, signora," turning to the baroness, "I may be permitted to offer my heartfelt congratulations on this event so auspicious, I trust, for your son. Nor to this fair lady can the event be uninteresting, I may venture to presume, from the friendship she has ever evinced for the noble family of Delancy."

That this enunciation of an honour so totally and entirely unlooked for should act as a surprise to both ladies was only natural.

Both were silent for a few seconds; after which the Baroness Delancy, in courteous terms, thanked the senator for the interest he was pleased to take in her son's welfare and

advancement, which last she attributed in part to the good offices of Signor Bembo.

"By no means, signora," responded the senator. "The only influence with the Council consisted in the tried bravery and skill of the young Raymond Delancy: of that permit me to assure you."

"Is the service immediate?" asked the baroness faintly.

"As soon as the necessary equipments can be furnished at the arsenal," was the answer of Bembo; who, having disburthened himself of his news, pleaded haste and departed.

With whatever vivacity and gaiety the Countess Luchesi might converse with Signor Bembo, his news had a grave effect upon her mind, into which again came the warning of the Father Momoro on the night of the illness of the baroness. Was it a scheme to draw Raymond away from Venice? This question she could not help putting to herself; and the more she reflected the more the affirmative pressed itself upon her. To her fair hostess she, however, made no observation even glancing towards such an idea. Nor was it needed, for the baroness was equally filled with thought by a change at once so deeply interesting and so sudden. The prospect of again losing the solace of her son's affection could not sit lightly on the breast of a suffering mother in delicate and precarious health; whilst the thought of the risks of war and the sea added bitterness to the pang.

Observing something of gloom and sadness in the pale but fine features of her friend, the vivacious countess, who was never deficient in gaiety of spirit, attempted to rally her out of it.

"Is it peculiar to the whole English nation," inquired she, archly, "to be sad over pleasing news?"

"Not so," replied the baroness faintly smiling. "Melancholy as some think us, though by others England is styled 'merry,' we know how to smile on occasion. To say sooth, however, my dear countess, I am unfit to be taken as a criterion of English cheerfulness. They who have known many vicissitudes dread all changes, even flattering ones not excepted. And when some of the events of our past life

have been so strange as to defy comprehension, we fear lest, in every alteration of fortune, some unseen and invisible mystery may lurk, and that we may fall upon evil when we fancy there is least reason to expect it."

"Have the events of your life then, my dear baroness, been so very extraordinary?" remarked the countess, giving way to the strong feeling of female curiosity.

"Some of them," answered the baroness; "so strange, that even to allude to them is both difficult and painful." And her increased paleness as she spoke showed that this assertion was far from destitute of foundation.

"The saints forbid that I should remind my friend of passages far better forgotten," rejoined the countess. "Perhaps there has been too much of that already."

At this observation the baroness changed colour, and looked piercingly for a moment in the face of her companion. "I shall be candid with you, dear friend," she at length responded. "I was, it is true, too strongly reminded by accident, some few days since, and at the Palace Luchesi, of passages I have striven to forget. But this was by accident merely. Trifles affect the imagination of those whose health is weak; and such is my case. To this I must beg you, my dear countess, not further to advert. With regard to events that in the course of my life may have happened to me, let me assure you I only forbear to allude to them, even in your presence, because things which, to my own mind, even now seem incredible, I cannot expect others either to believe or listen to." These last observations were made by the baroness in a low tone, and not without some visible agitation of manner, which she strove in vain to suppress.

"Signora," said the countess, much impressed by her manner, and kindly taking her hand, "to the world in general this may apply, but not to me. I, too, have had my vicissitudes: and if there have been times in your life in which you were environed by events which cannot be explained, such things, let me assure you, form, to me at least, no ground for incredulity; inasmuch as to disbelieve you I must first disbe-

lieve the evidence of my own senses, which have been as strangely tested, perhaps, as your own."

There was an unusual gravity in the tone of the beautiful countess as she uttered these words; and a momentary emotion passed over her fine features, not unobserved of her companion.

"Dearest lady," responded the baroness. "for the present let us discontinue this conversation. It is perhaps one for which neither is prepared, nor is this perchance the time for it. From you, my dear countess, however, believe me," she continued, returning with a tremulous hand the pressure of her fair friend, "I have no reserves to make,—no secrets to hide. And, at a fitting hour, I shall relate you, unreservedly, matters which naturally have strongly roused your curiosity and excited your interest. This I promise you, and gladly; for to me your sympathy will be a relief indeed: but for the present we must break off."

As she uttered these words, the young Raymond Delancy, in all the flush of youth and satisfaction, entered the room. To the sanguine temperament of youth the prospect of honourable, perhaps lucrative employment, is always pleasing; and it looks no farther. If Raymond ever thought at all on the probable motives of those to whom the distinction thus shown him might with some plausibility be attributed, he perhaps, and not unnaturally, attributed some portion of the honour done him to the influence of the rich and beautiful lady whose heart, as he had now reason to know, was not entirely indifferent to him. If, therefore, he conversed on this occasion with the countess with more than usual vivacity and *tendresse*, the circumstance was only the natural result of the exultation which a young man must feel who, possibly by the influence of a beautiful woman, may be put in the way of winning honours which may be of consequence to both. And if when he handed her to her gondola, he pressed that hand involuntarily, with a significance never ventured on before, let gratitude as well as love have some portion of the credit of a fervour inseparable from youth.

That the young man had ever analysed the precise nature

of his feelings towards the fascinating woman who had shown so direct a preference for him is very unlikely. It was sufficient for him that in his own bosom a charm had been planted to the influence of which he was willing to bow. Whether ambition and whether gratitude formed part of the ingredients of the spell was a question which probably he hardly even if ever asked himself. To his lady-mother he made light of the presumed dangers of his new charge; and, absorbed in the cares of preparation and the fitting out and manning of his galleys, he had little time to devote either to her or to the presumed beautiful author of his honourable fortune.

Through many days the young Raymond Delancy was busied in the manning, fitting out, and victualling of the little squadron so suddenly put under his command. It consisted of one heavier and two small light galleys, such as were at that time used as cruisers at the entrance into the Adriatic, in order to defend the commerce of the then great emporium, Venice, from the depredations of the Ottoman. Ardently employed in these pursuits, the young man spent his days principally at the arsenal, and suffered neither recreation nor even rest much to interfere with that incessant and anxious attention to duties so congenial to his disposition, which a youth so early trusted feels himself called upon to pay.

The current of his thoughts was now destined, however, to receive an interruption which, for a time, forcibly turned them into another channel. He was often, by the arrangements he had to make, detained at the arsenal until a late hour, and on one of these occasions, attended only by a single servant, he was crossing one of the small bridges which in that obscure part of the city, connected the different piles of building that covered every foot of the islets on which they were built. The hour was late, and in the vicinity where he then was, all was silent. A somewhat dense fog, rising from the sluggish lagunes, obscured nearly altogether the rays of the moon now rising above the horizon, and not even the oar of a solitary gondola was audible in this quarter of the city,

when Raymond's ears were suddenly assailed by a shrill but stifled cry for help, uttered apparently by a female voice at some little distance. Rapidly crossing the bridge upon which he was, followed by his servant, he hastened in the direction indicated by the cry.

It led him along a narrow quay, skirting one of the narrower canals in front of a lofty pile of old and obscure buildings. As he neared its extremity, the canal was crossed by another bridge, leading also to a dark and lofty pile of buildings, beyond which the moonlight was faintly reflected through the mist by the face of the Adriatic, which here was open.

As the youth and his follower, with rapid steps, drew near the second bridge, he distinguished the noise of swords; and suddenly turning an angle beyond the bridge, where the quay facing the Adriatic became a little wider, he was at once made aware of a conflict of a very unequal description, and one which but for his interference must speedily have found a conclusion. Closely engaged with two men, having the appearance of hired bravoës, was a Moor, or a man at least whose complexion designated the Moorish origin. He fought with vast agility and courage, but, overpowered by the disparity of two swords to one, was driven into an angle of the wall that guarded the quay, by means of which he bravely kept his assailants at bay; receiving their thrusts upon a thick cloak wrapped round his left arm, whilst, with his right, he repaid them by occasional assaults, made with a desperate quickness that often awed his two enemies into retreat. These determined exertions were not without an object. At a short distance was a young female, apparently in a fainting state, in the arms of a man, from whom a second ruffian was endeavouring to disengage her, whilst a third, apparently a gondolier, seemed ready to assist in carrying her down a flight of broken steps that led to the water.

To interfere in a conflict so unequal, and under circumstances so suspicious, was not to Raymond Delancy a matter for a moment's hesitation. He instantly drew his sword, bidding his follower do the like, and called to the ruffian who was employed in disengaging the fainting female to

desist; having directed his servant to assist the Moor in his unequal struggle against his two assailants. The fellow, on hearing the summons, instantly turned round, beckoning to the gondolier to remove the lady. The engagement, however, between the bravo and the young Englishman was very brief. For a swordsman of Delaney's size, skill, strength, and agility, the ruffian was no match. A furious lunge which he made at Raymond was coolly parried by the youth, who, in his turn assaulting the other, stretched him in a few seconds dead upon the pavement. On seeing this, the man to whom the lady clung quitted her by a violent wrench, and with the gondolier rushing down the broken steps, fled, the noise of their oars being distinctly heard. The two men, engaged with the Moor and Raymond's attendant, seeing the retreat of their chief, at once turned also and fled, after bestowing an execration on those who had so providentially stepped between them and their prey.

Whilst these events were rapidly passing, the young Englishman was absorbed in his care of the lady; who, having fainted, was supported by him in a state of total insensibility. As soon as he saw his follower disengaged, he directed him immediately to procure, if possible, some water, and in the meantime demanded of the Moorish attendant of the still insensible girl the meaning of the outrage he had witnessed. To his surprise, however, he could not obtain an answer; and on repeating his interrogations, was given to understand by signs, that the man whom he questioned was one of those unfortunates whom Ottoman barbarity had deprived of the organ of speech, and whose inarticulate murmurings were utterly unintelligible by the young Englishman. At this moment his servant returned, however, with some sea-water in his cap, with which Raymond sprinkled, or rather bathed, the temples of the fainting female. These means in due time produced their effect. The lady shuddered, sighed convulsively, and at length, after an apparent struggle with insensibility, opened her eyes and uttered some inarticulate words, which Raymond did not understand.

As this passed, the fog which rested over the Adriatic and

the city upon its bosom cleared a little, and the moon, having now risen above the tops of the tall dark edifices which shadowed the spot, gleamed whitely and faintly upon the narrow quay where the scene was enacting. Again the lady murmured some unintelligible and broken sentences in some foreign tongue, and convulsively removing the fold of a cloak in which she was enveloped, the light of the moon faintly showed her features; the sight of which caused the young Englishman to start, whilst his heart tumultuously throbbed in his breast, from the suddenness of the surprise. The features of the girl whom he now clasped in his arms were those of the beautiful *incognita* whom he had seen for a brief moment, and lost so mysteriously, in the skiff near the ancient pile of the Carthusian convent surrounded by the Adriatic. To the youth they now showed more beautiful than ever.

As he gazed, the paleness of languor was being gradually succeeded by the gentle colour of returning animation. Her hair, which was a rich glossy brown, but so dark as to incline to black, fell round her neck in dishevelled ringlets of vast profusion. The eyebrows, which were visibly darker than the hair, as were the long eyelashes, were beautifully arched and pencilled. The striking portion of the countenance was, however, the lustrous eyes, which were full and dark, but of wonderful power and sensibility, and the ivory regularity of the teeth, which made the complexion of the owner seem somewhat browner than it was, whilst by their dazzling whiteness they heightened the faint red that now resumed its seat on the cheek. If the beauty of the features of this interesting being was singular, and striking, the elegance of her form was no less so. She was somewhat above the middle height, but her tapered, short, and slender waist, was symmetry itself; whilst the lithe elegance of her limbs, and the graceful turn of her falling shoulders, with the free play of the long but exquisitely moulded arms, gave the idea of that Circassian grace and freedom which Nature only affords in her most benignant moods to her most favoured children.

As the young Englishman gazed, half-entranced, upon the sylph-like creature that now rested in his arms, whilst the white moonlight, struggling with the mists of the Adriatic, more and more developed the exquisite contour of her features and person, she gradually recovered recollection, and with a faint smile recognised the Moorish slave who knelt at her feet, with anxiety and sorrow depicted on his dark but manly countenance; and who now made signs to her that the boat, her passage to which had been intercepted by the baffled ruffians, was now ready to receive her, offering respectfully his arm to guide her steps. This office, however, Raymond would not resign, and motioning to the Moor, they proceeded slowly down some broken stairs to the spot where the caique (the same which Raymond saw near the Carthusian convent) was waiting to receive her.

Here she turned to thank her deliverer, but when she recognised the features of the young Englishman, she started and almost tottered, whilst a deep blush overspread her face and neck, indicative of acute sensibility suddenly and irresistibly excited. Recovering herself, however, she proceeded in agitated and low tones to thank the youth who had ventured his life in her behalf. She did this in good Italian, but with a slightly foreign accentuation, which even the low, clear, and silvery voice in which it was spoken could not wholly disguise.

As she spoke, however, the accents created in the bosom of the young man emotions for which he could not account. Most persons of excitable nerves and lively imaginations have experienced that mysterious feeling which consists in the persuasion that some event which occurs, or sight that is seen, or words that are spoken, have been experienced, seen, or heard, at some former time, and that they have a connexion with something future that is about to take place. Such was the feeling which the tones and features of the sylph-like being now before him infused into the agitated soul of the young Englishman. Every moment told him that with his future this being would be in some way connected; nor did her voice seem heard, nor her features appear as revealed for the first time. For some moments he was too much

agitated to reply to the silvery-toned thanks that were now rendered him.

"Fair lady," at last he replied, "these thanks are superfluous: he who would not have done what I have done would be unworthy to breathe."

A pause here ensued, and the Moorish slave, having drawn the slight skiff closely in, made a profound obeisance, and stood prepared to hand the lady to the frail vessel to which her safety was to be entrusted, when again Raymond found voice.

"My guerdon, lady," he faltered, "must be found in remembrance. Give me to know by what name I shall recal the image of one whom to have served by the sacrifice of life would be to serve cheaply."

"Alas! signor," replied the trembling girl, her lustrous eyes seeking the ground droopingly, "make me not ungrateful, even at the moment when gratitude is most a duty."

"I ask not to be remembered," said the young man, mournfully; "I only ask the privilege to remember!"

"Alas! no. It cannot be," whispered the beautiful girl, her lustrous eyes now suffused in tears.

"Cannot be?" mournfully echoed Raymond.

"Oh! no, it cannot be!" was the response, in a voice at once so tender, so melancholy, and so melodious, that the youth's heart sank within him.

"From me," she continued, "fortune has severed even the poor privilege of giving a name to be remembered in return for a life preserved."

"And must we—must we—so part?" murmured Raymond, now wild with emotions he knew not how to master: "'tis most unnatural. Better cease to live, than live to witness such a scene as this, so to conclude it!"—

As he uttered these words the fair girl again turned, her bosom heaving with uncontrollable emotion.

Raymond seized her hand and kissed it: every nerve in his body thrilled. "Give me, at least, some token that this is not illusion," he said, "and that I am not the victim of unholy spells rather than the avenger of unhallowed violence!"

At these words the fair girl visibly started. She disengaged her hand and essayed to speak, but some inly emotion seemed to choke her utterance. She stood irresolute for a second. Her brilliant eyes were visibly suffused in tears. At last, as if penetrated by some sudden gust of feeling, she rapidly drew from her finger a ring, kissed it, placed it in the hand of the young Englishman, and ere Raymond could recover from the surprise of this sudden act, lightly stepped into the skiff, which, yielding to the oars of the Moorish slave, rapidly shot into the Adriatic and vanished in the dim distance, leaving Raymond Delancy rooted to the spot where he stood, in mingled grief, admiration, and wonder.

From this almost trance, Raymond was roused by the footsteps of his servant, who approached him as wondering at his delay. All else was silent. The noise of conflict, not uncommon at this era amid these obscure abodes, called no one forth. In fact, men shunned to mingle in feuds, often bloody, in which they were not interested.

Whilst Raymond and the beautiful incognita were conversing, his follower had committed the corpse of the dead ruffian to the fish of the Adriatic, which too often had such food, and the young man and his faithful aid were about to leave the spot, when the eyes of the former were attracted by something faintly glistening in the moonlight, on the spot where the struggle had taken place. It was a torn but richly embroidered riband, and Raymond eagerly seized it, as possibly affording some clue to the fair and beautiful girl whom he had saved probably from ruffianly violation and destruction. Gazing intently on it, however, to his utter astonishment, he discovered it had once been his own. To that very embroidered riband was attached the miniature portrait which he lost so strangely in the retired garden of the Villa Spinelli. There it lay, upon the very scene of the strange outrage which he had so fortunately interrupted; but all his modes of accounting for its presence ended only in bewildered uncertainty. Conjecture seemed in vain. Placing the evidence, therefore, carefully in his bosom, he returned to

his home and to a feverous and agitated couch, to which the first beams of morning were a welcome relief.

That morning, however, found him with a mind divided against itself. Ambition had bid him unite his lot with that of the beautiful countess; but a still small voice told him there existed a being before whose youthful fascinations, and simple but exquisite graces, all the rewards of ambition were as nothing, or as dust in the balance. Upon the ring which she had given him he looked, without being able to control his emotions, as a devoted enthusiast does upon some saintly relic. It was a seal-ring, of oriental workmanship, made of pale gold, and elaborately but grotesquely worked. The surface of the seal was of a glossy enamel, deeply set, the top of which was so managed, as to reflect in golden hues a pencil of rays. Beneath, the device was an altar, formed of a dark green bloodstone, spotted with crimson. From the altar, rose a pyre of flame, represented by a pink topaz, exquisitely cut. Within the ring, were Persian and Arabic characters.

As the young man gazed upon this token of the adventure of the preceding night, his hand trembled; his blood coursed through his veins with a feverous agitation which he could neither explain nor control; and, with a throbbing bosom, he deposited the ring and embroidered riband and miniature in his cabinet, as if they were sacred talismans of which he neither knew the potency nor the origin.



CHAPTER X.

THE TUTOR.

THE time was now near at hand when the young Englishman must sail with the little squadron intrusted, in a manner so unlooked for, to his command. As a matter of course, therefore, he was constantly employed at the harbour, or at the arsenal. When time allowed, his attentions to the countess had been as marked as usual; but keen observers could see

that over his usual fascinating manner, when excited deeply, a change might be traced; which some attributed to anxiety, others to disappointment, as their own hopes or their own wishes inclined them. Between the Baroness Delancy and her accomplished friend, however, the ties of friendship seemed to be drawn closer than ever; and as the days wore on, they were more and more in the society of each other.

It was now that time of year when the periodical rains forbid the search for pleasure in the open air. The young Raymond Delancy, upon the point of sailing with his light squadron, was now engaged without cessation in his duties at the port; and his lady mother, left alone, had, to vary the scene and dissipate the sadness which the imminent departure of her son now caused, accepted an invitation to the Luchesi-palace, to spend the eve of one of those festivals for which the city of Venice was then so noted.

The evening was, for such a climate, a wild and stormy one. The rain had poured down in torrents. A shrill fitful wind moaned along the troubled bosom of the Adriatic. Clouds, stormy in aspect, swept over the city and the adjacent continent; whilst, at times, the gusts seemed to be suddenly hushed, as by a spell, and that heaviness of the atmosphere which is said generally to precede an earthquake or a tempest, was partially felt by all. At the deeply niched window of a small closet or boudoir, appropriated by the countess to solitary studies or confidential intercourse, and richly adorned, sat the two ladies.

The window commanded a partial view of the Adriatic, and in the distance might be faintly traced, being shrouded in misty clouds, a range of hills rising from the mainland to the left of the city. The intervening waters seemed to roll in trouble and in wrath, as fretted by the rising gusts that swept at intervals their face; and not a vessel of any kind was to be noted upon the ruffled surface. To beguile the *ennui* and feeling of cheerless vacuity which such scenes are apt to excite, especially in sensitive temperaments, the countess resolved to remind her friend of the narrative which she had promised, in a way certainly calculated to excite both

interest and curiosity. She did so; and the baroness, who had now regained even more than her usual health and strength, readily acquiesced in a request which she herself had sanctioned by anticipation.

“In giving you, my dear friend,” said the baroness, “the narration upon which I am about to enter, I must entreat your utmost indulgence. I may probably appear to you to dwell upon circumstances occasionally seeming minute and unimportant; whilst I shall be compelled to pass over others of seemingly graver import, without the explanations which, to you, they may apparently demand. In excuse, I can only say, that it is perhaps inseparable from the nature of strange events that they can only be strangely told; and that a narrative of mysterious circumstances must necessarily be in itself unequal, and in its course sometimes inexplicable; as are the events which it professes (perchance rashly) to describe.

“To commence, then. I am, as I think, my dearest countess, you already know, the only daughter and heiress of an English knight, of ancient family and large manorial possessions, the late Sir Aymeric de Burgh. During the earlier years of my father’s life he had mingled with the politicians of his time, and been occasionally employed in the public service. In the religious innovations, however, which it was his lot to witness, he could not join; and hence the latter years of his life were passed in retirement, in which, without openly consenting to, he tacitly acquiesced in the religious revolutions that ensued. He in fact appeared to endeavour to forget them, in the pursuit of field sports, of which like most persons of his rank he was very fond, and in the cultivation of literature, in which he was not unskilled.

“His paternal seat was situated in Warwickshire, an inland province of England; but for the sake of more thorough retirement and seclusion, he had refitted a small and romantic castle on the borders of North Wales, which his father had acquired by marriage, but which had been suffered to get into a state of dilapidation. It was placed in a beautiful but lonely solitude; being built in the gorge beneath two steep and craggy mountains, between which

ran a somewhat broad and rapid stream, communicating with a small lake or tarn, at some distance, where the glen became wider. Upon a rock of moderate height, around the base of which rushed the clear and rapid stream, stood the structure.

“On three sides the rock was ragged and steep, and covered with the dwarf oak, the birch, and the mountain ash; as were all the lower portions of the rocky mountains which shrouded it. To the south-west from its front the eminence sloped down to a level or lawn of no great extent, from which a road led down the glen, hemmed in by rocks, close to the margin of the rocky rivulet. Above the castle the glen narrowed until it ended amidst rocks, the debris of the surrounding mountains, and became totally impassable. From the cliffs came down, on all sides, little rivulets in steep and fantastic cascades and cataracts; and on the tarn, and by the wild stream, the heron, the egret, the osprey, the mallard, and the teal, were found in numbers, whilst their waters supplied the char, the lake and river trout, and the salmon, in their seasons. Amid the hills, the roe and the fallow deer roamed numberless; and on their sides and tops the heath-cock, the black-cock, the capercaillie, and the ptarmigan, afforded constant sport for the falconer and the fowler; whilst the fox and the marten were denizens of the wilder cliffs and thicker forests.

“Amidst these wild scenes, the earlier years of my youth were passed. My father, who was dotingly fond of me, had himself instructed me in the more usual branches of education; but with this he was, of course, not satisfied. He wished me to be also instructed in the language and literature of Italy, which were now becoming fashionable in England, and of which he was very fond. With this view he corresponded with a kinsman who was resident in the metropolis, and who undertook to find out and send to him some person eligible as a tutor for his daughter. This was not easily accomplished, the religious feuds agitating England being necessarily distasteful to foreigners. After some months had elapsed, however, he again wrote to Sir Aymeric

to inform him that he had at length succeeded ; and after a time, the castle received its new inmate. His name was Antonio.

“He was a young man ; probably not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age. His features were of the cast known as ‘Italian,’ though not strongly so ; but were finely cut, and, on the whole, handsome. His complexion was dark, and his hair, which curled naturally, was, like that of most Italians, of a glossy black and very luxuriant. The remarkable part of his visage was the eye, which was peculiarly lustrous, and at times had a wildness, tortuosity, and peculiarity of glance that was very singular. He was of the middle size, and elegantly though slightly made ; and in gait and manner astonishingly easy and elegant. To our surprise he spoke the English language very correctly and even fluently, though with a foreign intonation occasionally ; and with Italian he seemed equally conversant.

“I was then about midway between sixteen and seventeen years of age ; and, as you may suppose, very zealously and gladly set myself to work to learn the Italian language, under the auspices of my young and not uninteresting tutor.”

At this expression the countess faintly smiled, as if half-unconsciously, but made no observation.

The baroness, not unobservantly, went on. “A simple girl, whose years had been passed in seclusion, who was destitute of a mother’s care and little accustomed to strangers, might be pardoned if she found some interest in a novel pursuit ; in company with a guide, of manners by no means unpleasing, and of accomplishments very extraordinary”—added the baroness hesitatingly—“to say the least of them.”

“They who demur to that must be rigid censors, in good truth,” said the countess.

The baroness did not respond, but continued her narrative.

“Under the tuition of Signor Antonio, as he was generally styled in the family, I soon made some progress in mastering the Italian language, and began to feel a deep interest

in its literature, so different from the rude essays of my own countrymen. With Sir Aymeric Antonio was soon a favourite. In his love of literature the Italian seemed deeply to sympathize; and in his field-sports, to which my father was passionately devoted, he could join. In these matters, as I have often heard Sir Aymeric remark with wonder, his instinctive faculty was astonishing, and resembled that which the Spaniards now ascribe to the Indians of their new world.

“He could trace the trail of the marten, the course of the wild cat, the track of the fox, or the run of the stag, where the skilfullest of the knight’s huntsmen were completely baffled, and when even the sagacity of the sleuth-hound or the lurcher failed. The unerring certainty with which he threaded the wilds of the savage scenery amidst which these sports led him, also bewildered every one in wonder. When the oldest mountaineer was uncertain of his road, Antonio, apparently by means of a few simple observations which this extraordinary art taught him to make, would ascertain the true direction, and thread his way, through glen and forest, with a facility which hart or mountain-roe could not exceed, and the catamountain hardly match.

“But to all inquiries as to how he became possessed of this strange craft he returned evasive or general replies. He had been exercised (he said) in strange lands, and amid wilder scenes than Wales could produce. In fact, in such awe did the foresters and huntsmen at length come to hold him, in consequence of these surprising feats, that, at last, it was evident they almost feared to speak in his presence, and looked on him as one possessed of lore forbidden to commoner men. Nor were these wild fancies of their rude and simple minds without excuse. There was a reserve, and there was a mystery, about the deportment and studies of Antonio, well calculated to imbue with strange imaginings and suspicious minds of this class,—and perhaps other minds,” added the baroness, “less liable to aught that some men dare to call superstition.”

On hearing this expression, the countess seemed startled

or surprised ; and, for a second, perused eagerly the countenance of the interesting lady who was yielding this narration to her curiosity. She, however, made no remark in words, and the baroness continued her relation.

“ When not called for by duties or engagements of some more trivial kind, his studies were solitary, and often prolonged far into the night. In fact, the servitors of the household insisted that he always paced his turret-chamber during certain nightly phases of the moon, and that from the turret-top he was seen to observe the culminating of certain stars. Of one who, amongst other sciences, was read in astronomy and the planetary motions, this was a tale easily told, and easily explained to those who knew enough to apprehend the terms of such explanation ; but to any intellect some portions of his acquirements might seem extraordinary. The few books which he brought with him were transcribed on vellum, and were in Arabic or Persian characters, or some other to which I cannot even give a name. On more than one occasion, also, his knowledge of the curative virtues of certain herbs seemed very surprising. Yet the secrets of alchymy and the notion of a universal elixir, or of the transmutation of metals, I have reason to think he held in contempt.”

“ Indeed !” echoed the countess in a low voice, and as half unconscious that she spoke at all.

“ Such is my belief,” responded the baroness, pausing for a moment, and then continuing,—

“ And in this, perhaps, was to be sought and found the most inexplicable mystery of his character, strange as were some of its lineaments.”

“ As how, I pray you ?” inquired the fair countess.

“ In this,” answered the baroness. “ Joining as he did in these various pursuits ; partaking in the field-sports, and in fact in the literature of Sir Aymeric ; imparting to me not only the knowledge of the Italian tongue, but of the beauties of your finest writers ; and clearly exhibiting, to such as could appreciate it, a surprising acquaintance, not only with the science, but also the whole lore of the schools ; there was

yet in his tone, air, and manner, occasionally something betrayed which seemed to say that he held all this in utter contempt; and that in the inward recesses of his mind was treasured that, whatever it might be, which he held in an estimation far beyond any which he awarded to the lessons of the schoolmen."

"But this was inference," observed the countess.

"As to that hereafter," replied the fair narrator. "In everything, in all things, it was occasionally apparent. In the services enjoined by our holy faith (and the baroness crossed herself as she spoke) he indeed joined like the rest. Yet how unlike! It was gone through as is a daily task; and not seldom a sarcastic smile played upon lips that ought to have been supplicating only the mediation of the blessed mother of God or the saints."

"The ministers of our faith," remarked the countess, in a low tone, "are frail and fallible, though the faith they teach be pure. Their ministrations may awake sarcasm, and yet our faith be untouched."

"It may be so," responded the baroness. "But be that as it might, it was remarked that Father Bartholomew, the chaplain of Sir Aymeric, seemed to shrink from and stand in awe of that man. Holy Mary, shield us! he had seen, as he said, the Holy Land, the spot of man's redemption, and with the same eyes and hands that saw and touched that holy sepulchre where God and man once lay, had he seen and touched the Caäba, that accursed talisman, worshipped by the Ottoman infidels and enemies of our faith."

"And what thought dearest Esperance of this?" asked the countess.

"Alas! I was simplicity itself," responded the baroness, "and was dazzled by knowledge which, to my young imaginings, seemed almost preternatural, and yet came in the guise of a calm and even humble philosophy."

"Those who have known and seen much," observed the countess, after a pause, "to the casual observer oftentimes seem indifferent to all."

"So deemed the good Sir Aymeric, my father," continued

the baroness; "and his contentment of course was mine. Besides, I was the only being in whom the gifted Antonio seemed to take an interest. To my girlish questions he had still an answer ready; and was equally prompt to explain to me the anatomy and virtue of the meanest herb or flower, or to describe to me the structure of the telescope of the star-gazing Galileo. With such accomplishments, was it wonderful that such a being should obtain the mastery over the mind of a simple, sensitive, untutored girl?"

"I have not said so," rejoined the countess, with a faint smile, which almost, however, ended in a sigh; "but—but is that the appropriate word, dear baroness?"

"Yes, unquestionably and entirely so," firmly and somewhat emphatically rejoined the lady thus appealed to.

"It was a fascination and an awe; a masterdom of the soul. Vanity might have place there, but certainly no warmer passion. Love I had never felt, and never shall, as I might have done under circumstances less peculiar," she faintly added.

The countess almost started, and gazed on her friend with eyes betokening interest and curiosity strongly excited, but said nothing. The baroness continued her narrative.

"Such was the character of the tutor whom Sir Aymeric had entrusted with the tuition of his daughter. It was singular and mysterious from the first. To his pupil he was from the first attentive; and as I made progress in the tongue which it was his duty to teach me, and appreciated the literature which that tuition necessarily brought before me, I could not but perceive that his interest in me visibly increased. In fact, he took a visible pleasure in answering such inquiries as curiosity prompted me to make on the various themes that presented themselves to my attention, and expatiated with delight on the varied topics not only connected with Italian history, but also with philosophy, and with the higher poetry in which Italy is so rich. From the teaching of the Italian language he also extended his tuition to the rudiments of the Latin, from which it is derived; so that I now began to understand the phraseology of the

schools, and became accustomed to the terms of science, not only as applied to botany, metallurgy, or alchymy, but to the metaphysical theories of the schoolmen, and their controversies as to subjects which must, perhaps, ever remain dark to our human understandings."

"And could you listen to this?" asked the countess, whose curiosity seemed now to be deeply engaged in the narration of her interesting friend.

"I could," answered the baroness. "The sometimes wild and discursive notions as to the nature of spirit; the separate existence of the soul; its possible communion with unseen beings; its independence of its corporeal tenement, and of the mysteries of sensation, and of the incomprehensible link that enables the corporeal to communicate with the spiritual, in which he would sometimes indulge, were no uninteresting themes to a young and vivid imagination; and stimulated a curiosity which it is easier to excite than to satisfy."

"Doubtless," said the countess; "and whilst he thus excited your feelings he pampered his own!"

"I know not that," replied the baroness, becoming pale and nervous as she spoke.

"Nay! you must be candid, dear baroness."

"Candid," rejoined the fair speaker. "Think not that from you I have aught to hide. No; you will believe me when I say that the truth slowly dawned upon me; and I could not but see that every day the mystic Antonio took a deeper and deeper interest in his pupil. That the dark allusions to unknown science, in which he at times indulged, deeply penetrated a simple, sensitive, an ingenuous mind, there is no crime in owning. Could it be otherwise? And farther, I do not hesitate to say, that when my curiosity was strongly aroused by the excitement of these mysterious hints, I more than once detected those burning and extraordinary eyes riveted upon me with an intensity of expression that made me tremble."

"Tremble!" repeated the countess, almost unconsciously.

"Yes; with a mixture of awe and admiration indescribable in words. There are influences of which we know not the

nature, and which language has no terms to portray, but which are not the less real for that! I never knew the nature of that man's influence. But it *was* influence notwithstanding."

The countess touched her friend's thin and tremulous hand in token of acquiescence, but spoke not.

"No; nor of the emotions which I had excited in the breast of that Italian can I to this hour precisely imagine the nature. That they at last became deep and strong I had ample proofs." ..

"Indeed!" said the countess.

"At least so they seemed to me," added the baroness.

"About this time arrived at the castle the young Raymond Delancy, now my husband; and before he had been many days an inmate, Antonio had gathered from some expressions, dropped incautiously by Sir Aymeric, that it was the wish of both parents that I should now, after the custom of our country, be betrothed to the young man, whom both the old baron, Marmaduke Delancy, and Sir Aymeric had destined to be my future husband."

"From that hour his hatred to the young Raymond could not be concealed by the Italian; who omitted no art to lower him, as he supposed, in my esteem, and whose malevolence would, had further dealings been easy to be compassed, perhaps (at least I have since thought so) hardly have stopped there."

A slight ejaculation here escaped the lips of the Countess Luchesini.

"You startle at this, dearest countess," continued the speaker. "But remember human selfishness includes all human crime, and to the modifications of *that*"—and here her voice became tremulous as she spoke—"where will humanity ever find an end?"

"But we must not infer crimes so," interrupted the countess. "Was aught attempted? was aught plotted?"

"The contrary," answered the baroness firmly. "He saved his life!"

"Strange!" was the only word whispered by the Countess Luchesini; nor to that interjection did she add anything.

“Not more strange than certain,” remarked the baroness.

“Sir Aymeric was, as I have already observed, ardently fond of the chase in all its forms; and in these wild and savage fastnesses these forms were sometimes alarming and novel in the extreme. The wolf is an animal which has long been exterminated from all the more level and frequented districts of England; but in the Welsh mountains, especially amidst the range of mountains of which the majestic Snowdon is the chief, and in the inaccessible glens of Scotland, a few still harbour, and in severe seasons are sometimes driven by famine to stray far from their wonted haunts in search of prey. An alarm was at this time spread amongst the shepherds that a wolf had housed himself in a steep, and precipitous, and lofty crag, thickly grown up with dwarf oak and mountain ash, and covered with creeping shrubs and plants, which skirted one side of the lake or small tarn to which I have alluded. This was enough for Sir Aymeric, who, attended by young Raymond Delaney, by Antonio, and by his huntsman and assistants, with some tried sleuth-hounds, proceeded to the precipice, with a view of dislodging the beast if possible.

“Urged by curiosity, and well mounted, I too was present at the scene, which was too remarkable ever to be forgotten. It was soon ascertained that the savage had made his lair in a narrow and deep cleft of the crag, overhung with brushwood, in which no hound could front him, and from which any attempt to dislodge him must be perilous in the extreme; as the cleft was high up in the face of the rock, difficult of access, and affording little room for those who should be hardy enough to ascend the precipice by means of the bushes and trees that partially covered its rugged heights. We could all distinctly view the riven cliff in which the wolf had his hold, occupying, as we did, a point of land which jutted far into the water, and was much lower than the precipice, a view of which it commanded. The rocks, where they met the black and deep water of the tarn, the haunt of the lake trout, the char, and the pickerel, were partially

undermined by its waves ; and the whole adventure seemed, if possible at all, perilous in the extreme.

“The huntsmen, with hardly a dissentient voice, gave up the enterprise as impracticable, and Sir Aymeric was about to return, when one of the huntsmen, and the then ardent and fearless young Raymond Delancy, volunteered to ascend the face of the crags, and by some means drive the brute from his hold. In spite of all remonstrance they persevered ; and armed only with a short hunting spear, and with some combustibles and means of striking fire, they proceeded to ascend the rock. With much difficulty, and after long climbing, they at length reached a ledge of the cliff, on which they could obtain footing, and come in front of the fissure in which the monster lay concealed. It was dark, and overhung with shattered stone, mixed with brushwood, and went back deeply into the rock.

“To attempt to enter such a place would have been madness ; and the young Raymond having kindled some slow match, fired a combustible and threw it as far as possible into the fissure, hoping by this means to alarm and drive out the savage inmate. For some time even this seemed vain ; and even fire and smoke, seconded by the baying of the dogs and the shouts of the cortége, appeared to be ineffectual. At length the rash and impetuous Raymond, with a lighted splinter in his left hand and his spear in the right, partially entered the mouth of the fissure, as if to reconnoitre, and to ascertain whether the savage game were actually sheltered there or no. In vain his older companion cautioned him ; he ventured further, when a sudden and affrighted shout from the huntsman told us the wolf was roused ; and to our horror we beheld the young Raymond, his spear being broken, in close grapple with the enraged monster, which had rapidly rushed at and closed with him.

“He was strong, fearless, and active, but these qualities availed little in a position so desperate ; and in a few seconds, after a brief struggle amidst the brushwood where the cliff sloped a little, Raymond and the wolf, in mortal grapple, were seen to fall into the sullen waters below, which were

there of great depth. For a few seconds every one seemed frozen with terror, save Antonio, who viewed the scene with a cool silence that appeared shocking at such a moment.

"As Delancy was evidently stunned and partly unconscious, and his perishing struggles rendered the enraged and alarmed brute more and more dangerous, Sir Aymeric, half frantic, implored some of the younger men to rescue him if possible. Some of them had made their way to the foot of the cliff, and were there within a short distance of the perishing youth, but no one dared venture farther. Heaven forgive me! half fainting as I was with terror, and all the mingled emotions called up by such a scene, methought the Italian seemed debating with himself whether he should yield to the entreaties of Sir Aymeric and myself; or leave the unfortunate Raymond to his fate. A brief consideration determined him, however. Throwing off his cloak, he drew a short hunting-sword which he wore on such occasions, and making his way like lightning to the foot of the cliff, he plunged into the water. A few vigorous strokes brought him to the place where Raymond, now in appearance lifeless, clung to the enemy under whose gripe he still was suffering. In the neck of the wolf Antonio buried the *couteau de chasse*, and left it there. Seizing the dying Raymond, who, now relieved, was sinking helplessly, in a few minutes he brought him within reach, though totally insensible. To relate the sequel of this strange scene would be useless."

"Wherefore useless?" said the countess.

"It led to no results. The smothered repugnance of Antonio to the man whose life he had saved continued visible at intervals. To Raymond's expression of gratitude, and to the praises and gratulations of all who witnessed the act, he only replied with a cold and unmoved unconcern; to him, he once deigned to say, who had encountered the cunning and cruel alligator in his element, the quieting of a half-drowned wolf, and the rescue of a half-drowned boy, was a light enterprise."

"Singular being," observed the countess.

"Singular, indeed," was the cold reply of the baroness.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPELL.

"I SHALL most willingly," replied the baroness, in reply to the request of her friend, "continue that narration in which you seem to take so singularly strong an interest; but before recommencing I must entreat you to withhold your possible derision at some portions of it, and scepticism at others, nor to ask me for explanation of some events which are to myself totally inexplicable, and so must ever remain."

"I shall obey you in all things," answered the countess, noting a slight tremor in her friend as she used these expressions: "fear not that, only excuse me if I long to hear the conclusion of a tale so singularly begun. You said, I think, the act of saving your present husband's life seemed at the time to make no change in the feelings of the mysterious being who preserved it."

"So it seemed," continued the baroness. "Of Raymond Delancy, and his character and pursuits, the little he said was mingled with a contempt he either would not or could not totally smother. It was so managed as to be visible without giving tangible ground of offence to any one. It was the sort of feeling a profoundly accomplished man may have for an uneducated boy—imperturbable, whilst it is full of a lofty superiority.

"To this, however, the recall of Raymond by his father the baron, after the lapse of a few weeks, on some exigence put an end; and our studies and intercourse proceeded as before, save and except that allusions of Antonio to some unknown and mystic science, unknown in these climes, were more frequent than before, as he saw my mind open to receive them. Of the knowledge of our schools and schoolmen, and of the lore of what he termed the western world,

ancient or modern, he sometimes let fall words of undisguised contempt."

"Contempt!" reiterated the countess.

"Contempt—undissembled, undisguised," repeated the baroness. "'How can they know,' he would ask, 'to whom the very direction of the path to knowledge is unknown, and who are afraid of such knowledge as they boast they have? Vain boast!'

"'You speak in riddles, signor,' I observed to him one day when he had thrown out some insinuation of this nature.

"'God forbid that I should do so—to the Lady Esperance de Burgh,' he replied, with a burst of ill-suppressed feeling that I must own for a moment startled me. I proceeded, however, further than I had ever yet ventured in interrogation:—

"'Do you, signor, then know that path which you accuse others of not knowing?'

"'How else, lady, should I know their ignorance?' was the marked and guarded reply.

"'And what then is knowledge, if those things which you explain to me be not knowledge?'

"'They are but the outer rind and husk of knowledge,' was the answer. 'They are external. In that direction true knowledge is not to be found nor sought by those who do not fear to find it.'

"'Is knowledge feared then?' I asked.

"'It is, and justly; for it is sometimes fearful.' This was said with a whispered solemnity which I shall never forget. 'But not justly,' he continued, 'by such as tremble on its very threshold, who like children can be scared by a mask!—who startle at the superficies of things!'

"'And who are these?'

"'Does the Lady Esperance de Burgh need to ask that?' was the bitter reply. 'Who were those that dungeoned the star-gazer Galileo for seeing a little farther than themselves?'

"There was a reckless scorn in the reply that almost made me shudder, so appalling seemed it to a young mind.

"May not such science, signor, as that of the Florentine, I hesitatingly asked, 'lead our erring and imperfect nature beyond its depths?'

"Easily, most easily, lady.' And there was a bitterness in the quiet smile with which he said the words. 'When once the wrong direction is chosen, the further we proceed the worse is our condition.'

"I understand you not, Signor Antonio.'

"Your European science-mongers,' he replied, 'seek it in externals, where it can never be found. What do your stargazers, your physicians, your alchymists,—your Raymondus Lullius, your Arnoldus, your Nostradamus, your Cornelius Agrippa, your Galen, your Gabor—for such are the names of your sages of the west—children in knowledge—themselves sickly exotics—poring amidst weeds for medicinal herbs! What are their catalogues of stars—their four elements—their solvents and elixirs—their *kali* and their *spiritus ardens*—their metallurgy, their Saturns and Mercurys,—what is it all but a treatise of the mere shell, and bark, and husk, and cuticle of creation, amid the everlasting folds of which they may explore to their own bewilderment for ever? And this because in externals there is nothing but what is outward; whilst of the inward—of the Entelechia—of the soul of our being, they know nothing!'

"I must confess I was not more astounded by the extraordinary nature of the sentiments thus expressed, than by the confident and rapt animation with which they seemed to be enunciated."

"And very naturally so, methinks," interposed the countess, with an air of something like bewildered surprise. "And what reply made my dearest baroness to a rhapsody so extraordinary?"

"If this can be,' said I, after some hesitation; 'if amid the sages of Christendom and the founders of Christian civilisation, wisdom and knowledge are not to be found, where shall we seek them?'

"As I spoke these words methought his eyes flashed fire, and he paused for some moments as if communing with

himself whether to go farther or not. At length he proceeded:—

“‘You inquire, Lady Esperance de Burgh,’ he said in deep and solemn tones, ‘where knowledge and where wisdom are to be sought? In those regions, I answer, where man himself was cradled, and where alone his intellect is matured. Where he is not led, as childhood is, by the eye, or the ear, or the touch; where the outward senses are known for what they are worth. Where man hath turned his researches inward upon himself; and no longer deluded or bewildered by the gauds and false colours of external things, has dived deeply into his own soul, and seized the secrets of his own being.’

“‘Of his own being!’ I reiterated.

“‘Of his own being, lady,’ he replied solemnly. ‘Such is the lore of five thousand years’ acquirement.’

“‘And the region where such lore is formed?’

“‘In the Orient, Esperance de Burgh!—In the Orient, where the race of man is old as the foundations of the eternal hills themselves; ay, and his knowledge dark and deep as their recesses. You shrink, lady,’ he added in a low tone and hastily. ‘I have alarmed you. Yet fear not!’—and as he said this he smiled bitterly—‘there is no heresy in the words.’

“‘Who hath been there to learn these things?’ asked I; awed and confused, but unwilling to exhibit or acknowledge either awe or agitation.

“‘The answer was direct and immediate:—‘I have, lady; for there was I cradled, there nurtured.’

“‘Had a cockatrice come across my path I could not have been more frozen in terror and surprise than I was by these words; but if I was frozen the snake had also power to fascinate—You look pale, dear countess!’

“‘Only a transient dizziness,’ answered the countess quickly. ‘Did he proceed in his revelations?’

“‘He did; and that a young and imaginative girl should listen is surely no marvel. I could not choose but do so, such was the power of the spell of details so wild and so strange.

“‘I was born,’ said he, ‘in India, that garden whence the

race of man first sprang, and where primeval knowledge first began. My mother was indeed an Italian, and of noble Lombardian strain; but my father was a Parsee, in whose veins ran antique blood, compared with which the pedigrees of the Egyptian Pharaohs are as of yesterday. Of the lore of his ancient race he was one of the depositaries. In all the learning of that primeval Tsabaism—of which he whom Hindoos call Bramah, and the Greeks and Latins Ammon, and Jews and Christians and the spawn of Mahomet Abraham, was the soldier, legislator, priest, and prophet—he was deeply versed. To him also were known, as one of the few elect as trustees of such knowledge, the esoteric doctrines revealed to that Zerduscht, whom western sages call Zoroaster, but whom your budge doctors of the modern world have forgotten to honour as most clearly prophetic of the avatar of a divine Messiah. To that Zerduscht was first communicated the awful secret of the real nature of the soul of man, and of the means by which he who is endowed with sufficient intensity of will, and profundity of faith, in these highest mysteries, may attain to have power over it.’

“‘You tremble, Esperance de Burgh! Fear not! but listen.

“‘Know that to Zerduscht—whom those who know him not style Zoroaster—was first revealed that duplicate nature of the spirit of life; that separation of the anima and vita which syllogistic schoolmen babble of without understanding, but which can only enable that lower vitality to slumber in the grave in an oblivious segregation from the vivid spark or intense atom which is the entelechia of man, and then be again resuscitated by conjunction; but can transport, together with itself, that entelechia to the vacant body of another; or, if so need shall be, take with itself the external semblance of its bodily crust, and so reduplicate the man as he co-existed in his fragments, ere they were finally joined by the great creative hand of the universal Essence. Such was the lore the revelation of which was made to Zerduscht by his image, in his own garden; and as such it was taught by his disciple the Parsee, my father.’

"Observing that here I involuntarily crossed myself, he stopped short and paused, and then resumed:—

"That which is to me a pleasure is to you, dear lady, a fear. Be it so ; for so it must be. To the uninitiated such things are as a cloud which we dread because we know not what it contains ; or as the distant thunder amid the mountains at which we start because it augurs of we know not what. But to those who learn to love knowledge awe becomes pleasure—farewell !"

"That the dark feeling of awe with which these strange and wild enunciations filled me, was mingled with a deep and intense curiosity, it were vain to deny ; nor that in time the character of this inexplicable man gave him a power, and an increasing power, over me which even now I cannot altogether comprehend. True it is that the woman who even permits herself to be made the trusted depositary of a secret, becomes linked, in some sort, by that very act, to him who trusts ; so fine are the threads of which our relations to each other are composed. And this I felt, young as I was, without being able to understand it. When he entered the room in which I sat, I felt myself in the presence of one who had an interest in me different from which he had in others, and that in this I could not choose but reciprocate, whether I would or no. The sound of his voice taught me the same lesson ; and I knew that he knew it. How imperceptible are the first stealthy steps of destiny ! Of the fate which becomes loud at last, we hardly hear the first foot-falls !"

The countess sighed deeply.

"That the influence which thus first found room in a young bosom should grow as time glided onward, will not surprise you. 'Tis with the imagination as with the heart. The impression, once made on either, grows with our growth and strengthens with our strength ; and thus it was that my mind became more and more captivated and occupied by the wild and spiritual imaginings thus instilled, until my very dreams became almost wild realities, and the vision of the hours of sleep and of night seemed to struggle for mastery

with the musings of the day. In some dreams methinks there is a dreadful reality !”

The countess started, as if stung by an adder.

“I have sometimes thought the same, my dear baroness ; but 'tis a wild fancy.”

“Let us hope it is,” said the baroness solemnly.

“Well ! these visions,” rejoined the countess, resuming her air of gaiety, “you have of course forgotten.”

“Oh ! no ; dreams as they were, they were of those dreams that never can be forgotten. Methought myself in India for most part ; and strange to relate, although at that period I was totally ignorant of the nature and characteristics of Indian scenery, and of Oriental habits and costumes and usages, I have since ascertained that the scenes thus presented to my imagination in sleep were wondrously correct.”

“This is passing strange !” observed the countess thoughtfully.

“It is so,” said the baroness : “so strange, that even now I shrink in spite of myself from giving it implicit credence. But there were circumstances connected with these visions of the hour of sleep yet more extraordinary. In fact, so inexplicable, that I hesitate to give them utterance.”

“Not to me, I trust, my dear friend,” replied the countess.

“To no one else would I communicate them, of that be assured,” rejoined the narrator

“After a day, during which I had pondered deeply over the strange communications which I have partially described, I retired to rest. My sleep at first was feverish, disturbed, and painful in the extreme. At times I did not know whether I was sleeping or waking, so unnaturally agitated was that slumber. At last my visions assumed a more definite form and hue. Again, as I had often done, methought I was in India, and by the banks of a great river, on which grew the palm and many other trees unknown to my waking hours, beneath a deep blue sky ; whilst the clear stream itself glistened and glittered under the almost perpendicular beams of the burning sun ; and numerous birds, of shapes

and colours to me unknown, sported on the water or amidst the foliage.

“On a sudden, methought I was surrounded by a troop of young women, fantastically dressed, who placed me in the midst of them, and with measured steps, and to the sound of timbrels, conducted me towards a hill which stood afar off. It was high, steep, and conical, methought, and the path that led to its summit wound, amidst groves of tall palms, spirally round and round its sides. As we seemed to gain the pinnacle, the earth became covered with odoriferous wild flowers alone, amidst which unnumbered bees and brilliant insects glanced and basked in the sun, and amidst which the green and gold burnished lizard might be seen stealing. The view seemed now to open out to an almost boundless expanse,—around us was an immense plain, where the cultivated rice field and sugar-cane plantation were mingled with groves of palm, cocoa-nut, and banian trees, amidst which shining rivers could be discerned winding as to some point of confluence; whilst all around the horizon, hills seemed to rise over hills, until, in the extreme distance, ranges of mountains, piled like clouds, raised their white pinnacles, clad with glittering snow, high into the heavens, and like clouds, gradually seemed to fade into the misty air, in the last limit of the eye’s furthest reach and ken.

“On the highest summit of the mount stood a small temple, built as it appeared of snow-white marble, the floor of rich mosaic. It was circular and roofless. In the midst stood an altar, upon which burned a fire of pure and silvery light, and behind it stood a swarthy priest, with snow-white beard and hair, and clothed in flame-coloured vestments. Around his neck seemed to hang a glittering but living serpent, wreathed into that circular form which is the emblem of eternity; and by his side, methought appeared to stand the inscrutable Antonio, clothed in the white vestments of a bridegroom, wearing a chaplet of roses and amaranth, and holding in his hand a ring. Irresistibly I felt myself crowned in the same manner by the attendants, who seemed to flock round me; and, amid the shrill music of uncouth hymns, I

was placed at the altar opposite Antonio, who, methought, smiled upon me in triumph. Even now I feel the warm and smooth and soft clammy clasp of the hideous priest who took my hand, as it seemed, to join it to Antonio's, when suddenly a loud and hollow internal reverberation seemed to shake the mount. A sudden shadow came upon all. The snake uncoiled itself from the neck of the priest and disappeared. The silvery flame on the altar reddened, sank, and died. A dense cloud seemed driven by some sudden gust through the temple; and as a peal of distant but harsh thunder seemed to run amid the snow-capped pinnacles of the distant mountains, they disappeared. After a painful struggle, as from one existence into another, I awoke!"

"Yet this was but a dream," remarked the countess, observing a sudden paleness on the visage of her friend, "and you know, my dear baroness, we sometimes dream strange things."

"We do so," said the baroness, with a slight shudder which she struggled to suppress.

"And did aught follow this wild vision, for it was no more?" asked the Countess Luchesini anxiously.

"For some days, I hardly saw Antonio. I was ill. I almost (heaven help me!) fancied he shunned me. He was, however, engaged with Sir Aymeric; and for many days I suffered under a nervous and agitating depression, which I could by no means shake off."

"At that I do not marvel," observed the countess.

"Our next interview was, I think, accidentally in the garden, when he condoled with me, and politely expressed his sorrow for my indisposition, hoping we should soon resume our studies. So strangely strong had been the effect of that wild dream upon my nerves, even during sleep, that at the first sound of his voice, I almost visibly started. My agitation he must have seen.

"I replied as calmly as I could, that in a day or two more, I hoped to be well enough to resume them.

"'I hope so too,' said Antonio, fixing on me his eyes, with a searching glance, from which I inwardly shrank.

“‘I hope so too,’ he repeated, and then went on musingly, ‘yet so fragile is humanity, and so imperfect all that relates to it, that even the purest and most angelic natures are in this like the rest. The Lady Esperance de Burgh,’ he continued in a low and solemn tone, ‘has not now to learn that the pure passion and moral daring that can alone lead us to true knowledge, are not to be attained without a struggle.’

“‘A struggle!’ I echoed involuntarily.

“‘A struggle;’ he reiterated. ‘For it is not much more difficult, lady, for the substantial eye to look backward into itself and contemplate the secret of its own sight, than for the soul, used to external and vain appliances, to gaze inwardly upon that hidden world, amidst the eternal forms of which all true knowledge is to be sought and found. Which of us can shut the bodily eye, and so abstract ourselves from all that is outward, as to be enabled to view the essential forms of things? Which of us can do this, when, even in the holiest sleep, the promptings of our own spirits are contorted by the imperfect medium through which they must reach us, as the visible image by the imperfect glass? No; to converse with the invisible world, we must lesson ourselves to forget that which is external. From the substantial oblivion only springs the spiritual vitality. Can the Lady Esperance de Burgh achieve it?’

“‘Wherefore should I try?’ I timidly asked, again awed and agitated by these distant references to ideas so strange.

“‘To make the first step of a glorious destiny,’ was the response.

“I felt staggered both by the words and by the tone in which they were uttered.

“‘That destiny cannot be good,’ I rejoined, ‘which is to be sought in clouds.’

“‘From the cloud cometh God’s own fire,’ replied the Italian, in a tone of deep reverence and fervent devotion.

“‘The Eternal,’ I answered, ‘can control His own bolt, and can nurture the lightning as easily as He nourishes the flower which it withers. For mortals to attempt to imitate

were impiety ; and, were such things possible, are there not arts we are forbidden to know ?’

“ ‘There are beings,’ answered the Italian, in a deep and thrilling tone, ‘with whom ’twere destruction to converse. But there is not any knowledge attainable by ourselves that we are forbidden to know. The unseen world is ours as well as the seen, and all that is therein.’

“ ‘Who hath told us that ?’ I asked, ‘and who hath opened it to us ?’

“ ‘He by whose grace we enter,’ answered the Italian.

“ ‘The vision of the swarthy priest, the temple, and the altar, again seized irresistibly on my imagination, and it again instinctively recoiled from them.

“ ‘To be we know not where, to see we know not whom, to do we know not what,’ I replied in deep agitation, ‘may be mortal sin.’

“ ‘Those who fail, fear it may be sin,’ answered the Italian in a deep and hollow voice ; ‘those who persevere and triumph, know it to be virtue.’ He paused, and then added in a still deeper intonation, whilst his pale lips hardly seemed to move,—

“ ‘’Tis only when the fire dies, and the symbolic snake is uncoiled, that darkness resumes her empire !’

“ ‘At this extraordinary communication, I confess all presence of mind left me.

“ ‘Saints defend us ! how know you that ?’ I gasped forth, scarcely knowing what I said, and almost petrified with the suddenness of the shock.

“ ‘Antonio smiled ; but it was such a smile as sculptors give the marble lips of a statue.

“ ‘How should I *not* know it ?’ he responded, with a calmness that was absolutely startling through its very imperturbability. ‘How should I *not* know it, when I too was there ?’

“ ‘What followed the utterance of these words I can scarcely remember. A cold momentary chill seemed to strike my very heart. It was only for an instant. I felt the blood rush to my temples. It hissed in my ears as it coursed

violently through the veins. I grew dizzy and blind, and must have fallen, had not Antonio caught me in his arms.

“‘You are ill, dear Lady Esperance,’ he exclaimed, in evident alarm. ‘Let me support you to the castle.’

“By a violent effort, I recovered self-recollection, and disengaged myself.

“‘I am better now, Signor Antonio—quite well. It was a transient faintness merely,’ I added, and refusing all assistance, I made my way with some difficulty to my chamber, where, for what length of time I know not, I sat and trembled. I could almost fancy, my dear countess, that you tremble also.”

“If I do, ’tis with astonishment,” replied the countess, “for this is passing strange.”

“’Tis not more strange than veritable,” said the baroness.

“I doubt you not,” rejoined her friend; “but what followed this mysterious scene?”

“You shall hear. My relations with Antonio were now entirely altered. He had before interested me by his varied knowledge; his hints of deeper and more mysterious lore, cradled in the far-off, old, and gorgeous regions of the East; by his careful attention to my progress, and the evident interest which he also soon began to show in all that concerned me. This was now totally changed. I was still fascinated, perhaps more than ever, but it was a painful fascination. I have often thought it must have been similar to that sort of fascination which they feel who are led by an insuperable longing after that dark and forbidden science which can only be cultivated by intercourse with wicked spirits and the powers of darkness.”

The Countess Luchesini crossed herself, and looked wistfully in the face of her interesting friend.

“There was a dreadful curiosity in it which I shrank from the idea of realizing, but which I could not shake off. I was haunted by indistinct visions of eastern power and of eastern magnificence, which I fancied to be connected in some way with the knowledge of these mysteries, which in these regions had only been evolved after ages of knowledge

—the fruit of an abstraction from outward things unknown to the children of the West. These visions of unknown and inscrutable power were sometimes terrible, but thrillingly so. I dreamed of a secret charm so to freeze and bind up the vitality of a living body, that it should lie unmouldering and undecomposed in the grave, again to be revived; or to separate intelligence from its outward corporeal crust and mould, to unite it with the body of another. I had in fact had inspired in me, by the artful hints of Antonio, a dizzy doubt of the reality of all that was subjected to my senses, with the vague idea of another reality hidden in darkness, but to be discovered and revealed by those whose inquiries had been enabled to pierce the cloud which rested on the true nature of existence. In spite of myself, the visage of Antonio was associated with these wild and dreamy imaginations of I know not what. He gradually grew upon my mind as one possessed of the keys of knowledge and of power. With this was again associated a gigantic vision of oriental pomp and oriental magnificence, so fascinating to the fancy of the ardent, the young, and the inexperienced.

“To these phantoms of the fancy the essential solitude of my life gave additional power. The situation of the antique tower and fortalice in which we lived was as romantic as possible, but far removed from the intercourse of society. My father, Sir Aymeric, with his foresters, falconers and huntsmen, were employed day after day in various field-sports—hunting, hawking, fowling, or fishing—amid the mountains, fells, deep glens, and solitary tarns with which this wild and alpine region abounds. The heath-cock, the ptarmigan, and the capercaill or tree-grouse, the heron, the egret, the bittern, and the wild drake; the lake-trout, the red char, and the salmon, were the constant objects of his pursuit.

“This mode of life, followed by the good and guileless Sir Aymeric, necessarily left his daughter much to her own solitary pursuits or recreations. Solitude, which nourishes the imagination, at the same time weakens the judgment, and depraves the reasoning powers. No anchorite was ever yet

wise. From this undue ascendancy of a fancy, now unnaturally acted upon, how could I, a young and inexperienced girl, escape? I became fascinated through my own imagination. The image of Antonio became gradually interwoven with the visions in which I could not now resist indulging. This gave him, in spite of myself, an influence of which till then I had not the remotest notion or idea, and gradually formed and strengthened a tie between us, which was not the less real because I, even now, cannot give it a name. It was a sort of thrilling fascination that subdued the mind, and made it subject to that of the subduer. I could not either resist or conceal it; and he saw and knew it."

"The snake!" ejaculated the Countess Luchesini, involuntarily, and with suppressed agitation of manner.

The baroness felt a momentary surprise, but made no comment on this interruption.

"It was no emotion of love that I felt," she continued: "it was an awful, thrilling, and abstract feeling, with more of awe than love in its nature. Indescribable, and wild, and strange, however, as it was, it subdued the mind that felt it, with a dreadful mastery that perhaps love could not have exceeded. Whilst it exalted Antonio, it debased others. To my excited vision others now seemed mere earthly and ordinary beings; and this degrading comparison," added the baroness with some emotion, "extended even to young Delancy, my earliest companion from childhood, and soon to be my affianced husband."

"Strange and appalling spell!" murmured the beautiful Countess Luchesini, in a tone which seemed tinged with deep pity as well as wonder. "Can it be possible that such things can lead to good?"

"To what I might have been led I know not," replied the baroness falteringly and looking very pale, "had not the rashness of Antonio interposed."

"This is too much for you. You look faint, dearest Esperance," said the countess hurriedly.

"Not so," said the baroness, forcing a languid smile. "But when I think of the portentous audacity, and the wilk

and mysterious aspirations of that man, I confess I feel a renewal of terror, and wonder, and self-abasement, long since passed. I will be brief in my relation of the denouement that now suddenly took place.

“Near to the castle, and within its immediate demesne, was a remarkable and secluded spot, which was and long had been a favourite retreat of mine. Leaving the gardens by a small door on one side, a pathway, winding amidst such shrubs and trees as flourished in this mountain fastness, led to the edge of a small and clear mountain-rill that, purling over a bed of beautifully coloured pebbles, and fringed with mosses and wild-flowers, bent its brief course to the larger stream which washed the rocky base of the castle. Following the margin of this little rill, by means of a path formed chiefly of pebbles, a cleft of the mountain was speedily reached, through which, so narrow was it, and so abrupt the precipices on each side, the crystal rivulet with difficulty wound its way. After some yards the bed of the little stream again widened itself, and a spot was presented at once so secluded and so beautiful as almost to startle such as beheld it for the first time. Its area was small and level, and the rock rose like a wall precipitously round it on three sides. At the extremity the mountain-rivulet fell in a cascade over the rock from an immense height, to which it only arrived by a prior fall; the rocky cleft of the mountain, which was its channel, being fringed with shrubs and such trees as root themselves amidst the cliffs.

“This waterfall formed a deep basin of a few yards extent, from which the sparkling waters found their way, and in which multitudes of small fish glittered and played. Round this natural basin the ground was covered with moss, or with turf and flowers, whilst in the interstices of the rocks overhead the wild rose rooted itself, and various creeping plants and lichens gave charming variety of hue. In the rock opposite the rivulet, Sir Aymeric had caused a rustic seat and alcove to be hewn, and round the little area had planted a few sweet-scented flowering shrubs, which thrived luxuriantly.

"It was a scene in which the most thoughtless might meditate; and to this spot chance one day led me, I fear, to indulge in the reveries which had now taken so strong a possession of my soul. My father was absent for a few days. The hour was unusual, and I dreamed not of interruption, when suddenly Antonio appeared before me. I dare say I visibly started at this unlooked-for interruption, so noiseless had been his step, and so deeply was I immersed in my tumultuous and incoherent thoughts. I was the more surprised because I could observe a visible change in his manner and countenance. There was a look of triumphant superiority about him. At all times he could put on a sort of dignified reserve, which men deeply imbued with much and profound lore irresistibly contract; but now a kind of anticipated triumph flashed from the depths of his dark eyes, which were kindled up with an expression from which I almost shrank. I thought, as he seated himself beside me, that he was somewhat agitated, and only suppressed it by that effort of self-control which was habitual to him.

" 'You look passing serious, Lady Esperance,' he observed, after some ordinary remark on the extreme stillness of the evening.

" 'The look is not always an index to the thought, Signor Antonio,' was my reply.

" 'Not to those who know little of thought,' he rejoined. 'To those who know its inmost nature it is different.'

" 'Thought itself is variable,' I observed, parrying the assumption concealed under the phrase. 'The mind is like the sky, which may have more or less of cloud.'

" 'Not without a cause, lady,' rejoined Antonio, with something of solemnity. 'As no cloud floats in yon ether which does not fulfil some predestined purpose or betoken somewhat, so is the human soul prophetic of its own destinies; and as in the heavens the darkest gloom may be the precursor of the most glorious sunshine, so do the shadows of the mind forestall oftentimes only the brighter phases of our fate.'

" 'General deductions from circumstances of a nature so general must be,' said I, 'in their own nature deceptive.'

“‘Not so,’ said he markedly, ‘if it be true, as beyond all doubt it is, that there is a tide in affairs of every human creature, and that the happiness of our lives unquestionably resides in our innate perception of, and wise submission to, our destinies, be they what they may.’ As he uttered these words his eyes met mine with a gaze so unreserved and so searching, that I own I fear my heart throbbed audibly, and, so agitated was I, that I felt my very utterance impeded.

“‘Who can interpret such foreshadowings?’ I asked vaguely, and with an effort to escape from my own feelings rather than from any wish to continue a conversation I felt to be of dubious import and oppressive character.

“‘All may,’ rejoined the Italian, ‘even when such are solitary. All can, Lady Esperance, when they are linked with those of another. Why does the flower invariably turn towards the light? Because it doubts not the unseen power that at once guides and attracts it. Why does the light still smile upon the flower? Because nature teaches that there is a fated attraction in the smile.’

“‘These are fantastic similitudes,’ said I; not seeming to read the meaning which both the tone and glance of Antonio would fain have impressed upon every syllable he now uttered.

“‘Such similitudes are Nature’s language to her children,’ rejoined Antonio. ‘Had it been true, as the followers of that besotted and bewildered Arabian teach, that woman is soulless, for her such language would have been without a meaning, instead of being to her, above all, most eloquent. But Esperance de Burgh hath not yet to learn that yon tender moon, that almost seems to fear the twilight, is not more surely attracted by her terrene mate, than is the soul of woman made to revolve round another.’

“‘It may be so,’ I answered, still more and more mysteriously impressed with the impassioned tone and manner of my companion, ‘were this a time for such speculations.’

“‘They are for all times,’ he replied energetically, ‘though some may not be fit for them. Theirs is the loss alone whose diviner and more mental vision has been blinded by the

empty depravities of a shallow world to such sympathy, when 'tis theirs.'

"Of that I cannot speak,' I answered, I fear more and more confusedly, for the dim drift of his words I now began partly to perceive; and, as I did so, my brain seemed to grow dizzy.

"Then let your heart speak for you, lady,' said the Italian, in a low and whispering tone of voice, taking my hand for the first time. I trembled from head to foot, and would have withdrawn it, but could not. 'The heart,' he went on, 'well knows the power which the lips may refuse to acknowledge.'

"The power!' echoed I, startled by the word itself, as well as the turn which the situation was now taking, and the dim apprehension of some precipice towards which I was drawn; 'The power!' I faintly repeated, making a convulsive effort to withdraw my hand, which he still firmly held.

"It is the true word, lady,' was the response of the Italian. 'Yes! Esperance de Burgh, that power which binds the beautiful to the strong—the tender to the energetic—the pure in heart to the profound in soul—that power is now at work, and to its sacred influence even beauty and virtue like your own must be obedient: the lip may refuse to ratify, but the bosom must still respond. A wondrous and a splendid destiny must be accomplished; and through this hand can that accomplishment only be achieved.'

"The Italian paused for a moment. He saw that every minute of time that passed added to the confusion of my senses, and to the fascination that entangled me, strange and complicated as it was, with the most mysterious recesses of our nature, and the spells of the wild, the dark, and the profound.

"As he raised my hand to his lips, and imprinted upon it a burning kiss, I felt the blood curdle back to my heart, which now throbbed with difficulty. 'Lady Esperance de Burgh,' he continued, 'the words must be spoken—I love you! But not,' continued he, strongly retaining my hand in his, which seemed to burn with a fierce fire, 'not with such

love as ordinary beings call so ; but with that passion which souls formed alone for each other, and already in mysterious union, can alone experience. A passion which needs not pleading, for it is above it ; which needs not apology, for it is beyond it ; which lacks not explanation, for it is entire in its own revelation and mutual acknowledgment ; language lowers it, and it must be sealed thus.' And whilst I trembled in his embraces, and shrank from the ardent kisses which he now imprinted on my neck and cheeks, and, in spite of me, on lips now quivering with the conflicting emotions of a scene so strange, I heard him murmur in my ear—'Now art thou mine beyond recall ; oh ! star, that, rising in the west, shall set only in the Orient ! and in a world unseen as yet, and new to thee !'"

"In the Orient?" re-echoed the Countess Luchesini ; and there was a ghastly hollowness in the tone which startled even the baroness, absorbed as she was in a tumult of the recollections and feelings of a long forgotten time.

"'Twas too remarkable to be forgotten," replied the latter, "even in the whirl and delirium of a scene in which, to the last, I felt I was a victim and not an accomplice ; and yet I struggled against the fascination to the last ; and faint murmurs of no, no, were alone responded to his most fervid and ardent appeals to every passion that can sway the heart, the fancy, and feelings of the inexperienced, the innocent, and the young ; when an interruption, equally unexpected by both, dissolved the spells of the cloud-born serpent who had so strangely obtained access and opportunity for guile."

The countess gasped for breath, like one relieved from some fearful horror of apprehension or imagination.

"Some hurried steps had no doubt echoed down the narrow rift unnoticed by either ; but an exclamation, uttered by lips too familiar to both, now roused us from the wild and hideous scene of complicated passion in which both were involved. Even now I feel the electric revulsion of that dread moment. Antonio, starting convulsively at the sound, suddenly turned, and relaxing his embrace, I fell fainting back upon the stone seat in the alcove where he had found

me; but my senses were not wholly bereft me. I at once recognised in the intruder the young Raymond Delancy, whose eyes now flashed uncontrollable rage at the apparition of his affianced bride, as he deemed me, in the arms of his inscrutable enemy and unsuspected rival.

"The rest was the work of a few seconds. Muttering the word 'villain' through his clenched teeth, he in a moment drew a rapier, a weapon then newly introduced into England, and flew at the Italian, at whose bosom he lunged with a violence that may be conceived, perhaps, but cannot be described. The Italian shrank not; nor needed he, for strange to relate the gleaming blade shivered against his breast into fragments that glittered as they fell. The deadly struggle that ensued was as brief as the assault. The Italian at once closed with the astonished youth; and in the hands of the lithe and now maddened Antonio he was as the panther in the folds of the marsh-snake. In a moment more the young Raymond lay prostrate, and a stiletto, now grasped in the right hand of the Italian, was at his throat.

"*'I saved thy life,'* muttered Antonio, *'and thou wouldst have taken mine!'*

"He raised his arm as if to strike, but by a frantic effort I seized it. Antonio proudly drew himself up, and hid the weapon in his bosom; but the distortion of his dark features at that moment I shall never forget.

"*'Live, wretched boy!'* he muttered, at length, in tones the mixed sarcasm and hate of which are in my ear even now. *'Live! and enjoy as thou mayst her whom thou deemst thy bride; but know that, from this hour henceforward she and all who may claim kindred with her are mine!'* and with these words he disappeared."

"Never to be seen again?" said the countess, in a tone so hollow and tremulous, that her companion paused for a moment, and then answered faintly,—"*Never, never! at least in this world.*"

CHAPTER XII.

THE CRISIS.

FROM the time of his strange adventure, and rescue from the hands of violence of the mysterious but beautiful girl whom he had first beheld in the skiff so mysteriously lost near the Carthusian convent, there had arisen a certain constraint in the intercourse of Raymond with the enamoured Countess Luchesini. It extended itself to both, though it was hardly visible to either. On the part of the young Raymond Delancy, it was hidden under the bustle of occupation caused by his departure on the service of the Republic, the period for which now arrived. On the part of the countess, it appeared in shape of a thoughtfulness which before seemed foreign to her disposition. When not engaged with company or with her now attached friend, the mother of Raymond, she became subject to pensive musings and reveries which she appeared at times unable to shake off or dissipate. When not observed she would sometimes scan the handsome and manly features and form of the young Delancy with a painful intentness, as if she read something there that was hardly welcome. This, if noted, was imputed to a secret anxiety as to his departure on a dangerous service; whilst his less ardent attention when in her company was attributed to a similar anxiety connected with the responsibility which he was now, at an age so early, to assume as commander of a squadron under a foreign power.

Each, however, was conscious of a secret change of feeling which they would have fain concealed from themselves. From the bosom of the young Raymond the image of the young girl, so beautiful and so mysterious, whom he had saved from ruffian outrage would not be driven. Whilst in that of the Countess Luchesini occasional faint misgivings as to the steps she contemplated, the fruit probably of maturer

thought, appeared occasionally to arise. To those around, however, these changes were unknown. Amongst the Venetian nobles the fascinating countess was still held to be the prize of the aspiring and fortunate young Englishman.

His command was by many ascribed in part to a wish of the disappointed Senator Bembo to separate his foreign rival from the handsome countess, in the hope that time might produce something to thwart their union. In this sentiment some others were believed to participate; and it was known to all that the squadron of which the young Delancy had the command did not sail amid feelings in various quarters exactly in accordance with, or favourable to, either the ambition or affections of the youthful chief. The older sailors of the Venetian Republic felt aggrieved that even the subordinate command of two or three galleys should be intrusted to a man so young and to a stranger. Some of the younger nobility also envied him the favour he had found in the eyes of the rich, handsome, and accomplished countess. These knew not of the slight estrangement of which, in secret, both the chivalrous young Englishman and his splendid lady-love could not but be conscious. If they had they would have contributed to the pomp of the occasion with greater zest than they really exhibited, amid the military and naval pageantry of the day.

At a window, in the mansion of the Baroness Delancy, which commanded a view of the Adriatic towards the harbour and arsenal, sat that lady, and near her, looking somewhat pale and fatigued, the Countess Luchesini. Both ladies were richly dressed according to the holiday fashion of that time and country. They had witnessed, during the day, the embarkation and departure from the harbour of the young Admiral Raymond Delancy. An adverse gale and various other circumstances had delayed the sailing of the little squadron until a somewhat late hour of the day, and the consequence was that, before it had cleared the harbour and was at a distance from the arsenal, the shades of evening had begun to close round, and the gloom of a heavy autumnal night to overshadow the wave-circled city. A vast number

of gondolas, shallops, and other boats, had attended the squadron to some distance when it left the harbour, which it did under a salute of artillery and the clangour of bells from the various churches of the city. These vessels were generally the property of the younger portion of the Venetian noblesse, and were put in requisition to do honour to the youthful commander.

It has been already explained that his instructions were to cruise against and check the ravages of the Turkish and Moorish corsairs, and other light marauders in the Adriatic, and to support if required the operations of the Venetian fleet now in the Mediterranean, in which his father, the Baron Delancy, held a high and important command. The principal aim of his mission was, however, to protect at once the commerce of Venice from the constant interruption which it experienced from the cruisers of the Ottoman, and also to protect the coasts of Italy from the daring descents and ravages which these piratical adventurers were bold enough to make, and which kept all the maritime parts of Italy, as well as the island of Sicily, in a state of perpetual alarm. By these ruthless marauders, villas and small towns were frequently surprised, plundered, and burned, and the inhabitants who failed to escape were killed; or, as was more frequent, carried into slavery and sold at the markets of Morocco or Constantinople.

Against such invaders the enterprise of the young Delancy was to be directed, whilst his squadron also kept up the communications with the grand fleet of the Republic, now busied in checking and repulsing the active hostility of Turkish strategy. On this quest he had now departed, and as night was at hand, and the atmosphere gave indications of unsettled weather, most of the boats which had accompanied the galleys from the harbour might be descried hastening their return to Venice, and emulous with each other in a speedy retracement of their course.

The balcony window, on a sofa placed near which the two ladies sat, commanded a noble view of the Adriatic as it washed the islets on which Venice stands. That view the

shadows of evening, however, now almost veiled. Towards the left was the arsenal, scarcely visible through the mist and cloud that now crept over the surface of the waters. To the right the massive pile of the ancient Carthusian monastery was just dimly visible in the far distance, like some isolated rock amidst the waves of the Adriatic. In front were still seen, but rapidly disappearing, some portions of the gay and streamer-bearing flotilla that had surrounded the war-galleys on their exit from the harbour.

The two ladies gazed upon the scene with varied and mingled emotions, but both were silent. In one the emotions of a mother who had parted from her only child had precluded conversation; in the other a variety of conflicting feelings had conspired to chill that vivacity for which, at times, she was so remarkable. At length, however, as the night closed in, and lights began to show themselves in such portions of the different edifices as the window commanded, the countess requested her friend to conclude a narrative to her of an interest so deep and peculiar. The request was complied with, and the Baroness Delancy thus recommenced her story:—

“Between the young Raymond Delancy and myself the perfidious audacity of the Italian caused no permanent estrangement. On my affections, Antonio, I need not say, never had any real hold, though over my mind and imagination he had nearly obtained a masterdom quite as dangerous to female innocence and inexperience; and that this, as it was, caused me feelings of shame, self-abasement, mortification, and self-distrust, painful in the highest degree, need not be denied. Such was the bitter truth, although those only who have been exposed to such illusions can conceive how nearly they approach a dreadful reality; but for this, my dear countess, you must, I fear, rely upon my assurance alone.”

The Countess Luchesini with difficulty suppressed a sigh, but uttered no remark in reply.

“At the moment of the disappearance of the Italian, Sir Aymeric luckily was absent, nor did he return for some

weeks. Before that time, it was agreed between the young Delancy and myself to conceal from him the real cause of the departure of Antonio. Whether it was wise thus to shield from the possible vengeance of Sir Aymeric the author of an outrage so strange and so audacious, many may be inclined to doubt, but such was our resolve; and to my own lacerated and mortified feelings, I must own it was the most grateful. I would gladly have buried the whole in oblivion, and forgotten, if I could, that such a being as Antonio ever lived, so deep were the feelings of shame and fear these events had left on my mind."

"Fear!" reiterated the countess, almost involuntarily.

"Even so," responded the baroness. "The strangeness of his parting denunciations sometimes, in spite of myself, afflicted me with a vague terror, which reason vainly strove to shake off. I may seem weak in making these revelations, but such is the truth, nor can I falsify it."

The countess took her friend's hand and pressed it, in token of acquiescence and sympathy.

"We are strangely constituted," continued the baroness; "nor do we know either the weakness or the strength of our own being. To resume, however:—

"On the return of Sir Aymeric, the disappearance of Antonio was of course made known to him, and I saw with some wonder, that he was, in seeming, less surprised by it than might have been expected. I could perceive, in fact, that he connected the flight of the Italian with some of those troubles which our unhappy innovations in religion were, then as now, causing England. Nor am I sure that his original destination in that country had not been in some way connected with the convulsions that then, alas! shook it to the centre."

"With your religious convulsions?" asked the countess, with apparent surprise, and laying an emphasis on the epithet.

"Not as sympathizing with either party," replied the baroness, "but with some view of obtaining, amidst civil strife, that wealth of which a certain portion was probably necessary to the furtherance of those wild schemes of oriental

power and influence in which his inmost being seemed steeped."

"What evidence had you of this?" demanded the countess, with some agitation in her manner.

"No evidence," responded the baroness, "but that of circumstance or conjecture. The mystery of that man was his utter inscrutability. But that his soul was spell-bound amidst the gorgeous realms of the Orient whence he said he sprung, I cannot doubt; and however wild his schemes, and however forbidden his knowledge, there, I must believe, was their source, and thither their foregone destination. To Sir Aymeric his seeming, of course, was different. What it exactly was I never knew nor cared to inquire: nor was I in a state of mind to entertain such a topic; many months having elapsed before I recovered from the shock of these events, and many more before a secret dread, with which the parting denunciations of the Italian had filled my mind, in any degree subsided."

"But this was fancy:" observed the countess, "mere fancy, you must admit, dear baroness."

"Those who have lived longest in this world," gravely responded the Lady Delancy, "and have seen most of its many vicissitudes, are not the least superstitious as to pre-sentiments of impending evil."

The lovely countess again sighed, but made no reply.

"In the meantime, my father and his friend the Baron Delancy had matured an arrangement which had long floated in the minds of both: this was an eventual union between their children. It was now proposed that I should be formally betrothed to the young Raymond Delancy. To the surprise of my father, and almost of myself, I shrank from the proposal."

"Shrank from it!" reiterated the countess, somewhat surprised.

"You seem to wonder at this, my dear countess," continued the Lady Delancy. "I must repeat, what you perhaps cannot conceive, that the awe was indescribable with which the arts of the Italian had imbued my imagination. It was not

that I wanted affection for Raymond, but that I felt as if some inscrutable fatality stood between and separated us. I would willingly have given my whole soul to Raymond, but it seemed not mine to bestow. It still bore the dread impression of some unholy bond, from which it could not be freed, so deeply had the arts of the Italian penetrated and warped my imagination ; then, and perhaps even now, too excitable and sensitive to such impressions, and so dark was the shadow of the mysterious power which his hidden knowledge seemed to give over others. In fact, the memory of the strange events which I have imperfectly narrated, I could neither evade nor subdue. It overhung my life like a dark cloud, under the influence of which I trembled, as if it were big with some fatality from which I might not escape. I was entangled as it were in darkness, and could I under such circumstances become the betrothed of another? I could not, and many months—very many months—elapsed before this visionary feeling in the least wore away.”

“And you then at last became the betrothed of the present Baron Delancy?” inquired the countess.

“I did, at length,” responded the baroness ; “though not until after much internal struggle and conflict of mind. The remnants of the spell were still on me ; and I yielded to parental authority, rather than to the suit of Raymond or to my own feelings of affection for him, when I took even that step.”

“Strange !” remarked the countess softly but markedly.

“Not so, dear signora,” rejoined the baroness. “There were other circumstances which increased the gloom and uncertainty as to the future that then clung to me in spite of myself. My revered parent, Sir Aymeric, as well as his friend the Baron Delancy, remained invincibly attached to our ancient faith, and disapproved of the innovations of that dreary and I fear ill-omened time. This subjected them to some risk, and to vast anxiety and pain of mind. They were too loyal to their king to offer any resistance by force to measures which in their hearts they could not but deeply condemn ; and to everything in the shape of armed remon-

strance they were conscientiously opposed. They hoped that providence, which had permitted the church to fall into this gulf, would in the ripeness of time rescue her, and restore her to her pristine influence and dominion over the hearts of men. The errors of some of her dignitaries they saw and deplored as other men did, but of the alienation of things once dedicated to God they could never approve. Hence both sought retirement amidst the distractions of their country. They wished to avoid any active part in scenes which they altogether abhorred. Against their more rash fellow-subjects, who in some places actually resisted the changes in religion and the alienation of the possessions of the church by force and arms, they were unwilling to fight; join them they could not; and hence retirement on the part of both, was the only method of saving to themselves the sight of convulsions to which they daily besought God to put an end. But even this course became at last untenable; and a sorrowful neutrality was denied them."

"That was hard," remarked the countess.

"Hard, indeed, to simply religious and loyal men; as both, God knows, were," rejoined the interesting narrator. "But such was their fortune. In various quarters of the kingdom, disaffection had become serious, and an armed insurrection made its appearance at points so distant from each other as to argue deep and general dissatisfaction, and to create great alarm in the minds of those who then ruled the country. One consequence of this alarm was, that both the Baron Delancy and Sir Aymeric were called upon to act with their vassals, and no longer preserve a state of suspicious neutrality.

"This call upon their fealty they could not, however wishful to do so, any longer evade; and the result was that Baron Delancy and my affianced, as I may now style his son Raymond, were compelled to proceed with their vassals to the south-western corner of England, in which disaffection had at last ripened into active revolt and armed resistance. And this brought on the crisis (as I may call it) of my fate."

"As how?" asked the countess anxiously.

"The then young Raymond Delancy, who ardently loved me," said the baroness with a sigh, "made powerful suit to have our union completed before he departed on that miserable expedition, from which he might never return. For some time I withstood his prayer; but on the very eve of his departure love and nature prevailed. I could resist no longer, and though I almost shuddered to consent, so dark were still the presages that haunted me, we were at last hastily married by the chaplain. My husband, in the same hour, left me,—alas! to confront in arms his own countrymen; whilst I remained a prey to conflicting apprehensions of the wildest and gloomiest description."

"But some of these were real," remarked the countess.

"For my husband and his noble father they were too real," rejoined the Lady Delancy. "But beyond my fears for them, and my hatred of the cause in which they were unwillingly engaged, I was haunted by an undefined dread of some impending evil, that weighed me to the very earth; this so far affected my health as to alarm Sir Aymeric, who, of course, attributed all to a natural alarm for my newly-wedded husband."

"But of what, my dearest baroness, were you afraid?" asked the countess, with an anxiety of tone not unnoticed by her friend.

"I know not of what!" replied the baroness.

"The shadow of an undefined dread hung over me, that added darkness to a sorrow which was real and too well founded, and to apprehensions too truly based and too sadly fulfilled."

"That we have presentiments of coming sorrows, I believe," said the countess, with a sigh.

"I have had of mine," rejoined the Lady Delancy, growing tremulous with emotion, "and, to this hour, the terrors of that dark suspense seem more fearful in my memory than even the events themselves of which they were precursors. The cloud was worse than the bolt—the shadow blacker than the substance; except, perhaps, one fearful passage

which, God forbid, should have been aught but shadows : but I am talking confusedly."

"You are talking darkly, my dear lady ; that is certain," observed the countess.

"Forgive me !" said the Lady Delancy, "dark events can hardly but be darkly told. After several weeks of agonizing suspense, which to me seemed ages, these cruel foreshadowings were verified in the event. News at length reached us that a conflict between the insurgents—or Pilgrims of Grace, as these religious champions were called—and the royal forces had taken place in the wild county of Devon. The royal force was in the end victorious, and, after a bloody struggle, the insurgents were dispersed for the time ; but in the battle the Baron Delancy was dangerously, and my husband, then young Raymond, slightly hurt. This event procured for both a release from a warfare which was very distasteful to them. The recovery of Raymond's father from the effects of his wound was, however, slow, critical, and in the end imperfect ; and as the country was still in a disturbed state, and the royal forces only relieved from their dangerous position by reinforcements of troops brought from Germany to quell this perilous disaffection, we were many weeks without tidings, and the state of doubt and alarm to which I was too prone redoubled in strength and keenness. At last, after some months had now elapsed since the conflict took place, a messenger reached us with the news that the old Baron Delancy, though still languishing from the effects of his hurts, was able to travel slowly, and that after a few days I might expect my husband, whom I had scarcely seen after he assumed that name. Strange to say, from that hour my alarm and agitation—I knew not why—redoubled in violence, and sleep became almost a stranger to my eyelids, so unceasing were the tumults and assaults of a morbid imagination ; for such," added the baroness, hesitatingly—

"It must have been, doubtless," said the countess ; "but still, did these wild apprehensions take no distinct shape?"

"None," was the answer. "All was wild and undefined. But the mysterious warnings of the Italian never left my

mind for a moment; and this, added to my miserable suspense with regard to my husband, drove me at last almost to frenzy. I became feverous; and at times methought, especially on waking from brief and perturbed slumbers, my mind wandered, and I felt myself, as it were, transported to other regions and other spheres. My ideas of locality became confused."

"Strange!" muttered the countess inarticulately, checking herself, as it were, from saying more.

"At last, I received tidings that, in a day or two more, I might expect my husband. But this news, so far from dissipating my agitation of soul, seemed to augment it; and on the day when he ought to have arrived, the fever of my nerves almost became delirium. He came not, however; and my exhaustion and prostration became so great, that my attendants, in spite of my entreaties, half forced me to endeavour to obtain some rest."

Here the baroness suddenly and tremulously paused, as if overcome by some sudden recollection.

"This is too much," interposed the countess, anxiously; "you appear faint, dear lady."

"Not so," replied the baroness, recovering her calmness by a strong effort. "Let me make an end of this strange and wild tale.

"Feverous and exhausted as I was, my attendants half prevailed upon, half forced me to retire for the night. That which followed must remain in oblivion, for by me it cannot be told. The shocking and insane allusions of that horrible night, language cannot describe. If diabolical agency be possible on earth, to that I must refer them. If not, then to mental distress and a morbid fancy wrought up to a pitch unutterable. But I distress you, dear countess by this wild story—for you, too, look pale."

"Such a tale interests me deeply," replied the countess; "as whom would it not interest? But what followed?"

"That I can only relate from the accounts of others," rejoined the Lady Delancy. "On that night my husband returned. Alas! I knew him not. He found me in a state

of insanity or delirium, from which I was only recovered after the lapse of many weeks. From its immediate effects, it took many months even imperfectly to rescue me. And since then, with many of the materials of perfect happiness—with ample fortune, with rank, with a husband devoted to me, has my life been mysteriously embittered. From the consequences of these horrible illusions I have never altogether escaped. They haunt me still. In vain have leeches and learned professors of the healing art forbidden all allusion to either the facts or immediate consequences of that dreadful infliction of horrors—visionary in themselves, no doubt, but too real in their after-influences. Even at this distance of time, the recollection causes me to shudder. Holy Virgin! how inscrutable are the ways of providence!”

The baroness almost started at the fixed but dumb expression of fear which paled for a moment the visage of the beautiful countess, as she uttered this ejaculation. Perceiving, however, that her companion did not speak, she renewed her narrative.

“These ideal misfortunes, for such, I trust, I may term them, were followed by real griefs. The good Baron Delancy, who never recovered from his severe wounds received in that unhappy conflict, was seized with a lingering illness, and, after long suffering, died. My husband now became the possessor of the barony and its honours—but in our way of life this made no difference. He was still devoted to me, and to the care of our only child—a boy: born, alas! in the midst of affliction, and nurtured for many months at a distance from a mother too ill to tend him, or even to hear the sound of his infant voice.”

A deep sigh, despite her efforts to suppress it, here escaped the bosom of the Countess Luchesini.

The baroness, without noticing it, went on:—“But even this tranquillity was denied to last. My husband, now the Baron Delancy, was, like his noble and honest father, strongly attached to our ancient faith; and from the presence of its enemies would gladly have taken refuge in seclusion, as his

father hath done. To attend on me, to educate his boy—on whom the sad and mysterious circumstances attending his birth,” said the baroness, with a momentary blush, “seemed only to make him dote the more—and to join sometimes in the field-sports of Sir Aymeric, became his sole ambition. But even this humble happiness was at length cankered. Our ancient faith was now proscribed. To believe as our fathers had done became disloyalty. To practise its rites was sedition, to harbour its ministers was treason. Fidelity to the faith was construed into disloyalty to the crown. My husband became suspected. His life was aimed at; and to save it, he became an exile from the home of his ancestors and the land of his birth. In the service of the Republic he has been permitted to win those laurels which his own country has denied him the opportunity to deserve; and in your friendship, dear lady, and in the favour of the nobles of Venice, has his family found that refuge which their native realm refused longer to afford them.”

The baroness now ceased to speak; and for a few minutes both ladies were wrapped in a contemplative silence which neither seemed to be disposed to break.

At length the beautiful countess, with much hesitation in her manner, like one who reluctantly approaches an unwelcome theme, resumed the conversation.

“There is one question,” she said, “dearest lady, which, peradventure, even at this distance of time, you may be able to resolve.”

The baroness gave a sign of acquiescence.

“Can you,” said the countess, still speaking hesitatingly and faintly, “recall to mind the precise dates of these mysterious transactions, so fatal to your health and peace of mind?”

“I can,” answered the baroness, with something of surprise at the nature of the interrogatory. “Nineteen years have since elapsed; and the night of those wild and horrible illusions was one well known in this city of Venice. It was,” said the baroness, crossing herself as she uttered the words, “the blessed Eve of St. Mark.”

"Of St. Mark!" reiterated the countess, gasping as it were for utterance. "Are you assured of this? Is this not also illusion?"

Ere, however, the baroness could reply, her attention was drawn aside by a sudden gleam of radiance which streamed in at the lattice and shot across the apartment like a flash of serene lightning suddenly arrested in its course. Those who had witnessed that extraordinary light which illuminated the secret council-chamber in the distant turret of the unoccupied wing of the Luchesini palace, on the night of the visit of the cardinal, would have recognised it as the same. It also proceeded from the Adriatic, where, in the far horizon, the astonished Baroness Delancy saw clearly illumined the faint forms of those galleys of which her son was the admiral, now far away on the Adriatic. In a few seconds the radiance gradually dissolved and died away, and all again was wrapped in gloom.

When the agitated Lady Delancy had collected herself sufficiently to turn to her friend, she started, and with difficulty suppressed a scream on perceiving her reclining back on the couch on which she sat in all appearance inanimate. A convulsive heaving of the bosom, where the struggle of the *hysterica passio* showed that animation had survived the shock of which it so strangely felt the effects, alone proclaimed that, though recollection was for a moment gone, sensibility was still there. Nor was it until the alarmed attendants, summoned by the baroness, had tried various means of recovery, that the countess was again restored to recollection.

Her seizure she herself, as well as the Lady Delancy, who was also violently startled by that sudden apparition, attributed to alarm; and as such it was considered by her physician and attendants, who counselled immediate repose, an admonition which the lovely but still agitated patient was not disinclined to obey.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VOYAGE.

THE young Raymond Delaney and the little squadron of galleys of the Republic so suddenly placed under his command, had made their way from the port into the widening Adriatic, accompanied by a numerous and gorgeous naval escort. Most of the younger nobility possessed pleasure-vessels of various size and build according to the taste of fancy of the owner. With vessels of this description the little fleet of war-galleys was surrounded, until the curtain of evening began to fall over the now gently heaving bosom of the blue Adriatic. In the cabin of the admiral-galley the young Raymond Delaney had entertained with a marine collation, after the fashion of the period, a few select and noble guests. Many of them had more or less patronised his skilful and intrepid father the Baron Delaney, now an admiral of the Venetian Republic; and this countenance they now united to extend to his son. Amongst these gay revellers, his countenance beaming with smiles, was conspicuous the gorgeous and licentious senator Bembo. Amidst all the grandees and magnates there present, he seemed to resign himself most completely to the pleasures of the scene; and when he quaffed a goblet of the richest wine to the health and success of the young admiral, nothing could exceed the warmth of his friendship or the generosity of his anticipations. There were, however, those present who doubted the sincerity of this somewhat ostentatious patronage.

"Considering that the stripling is said to be a favoured rival," whispered the effeminate Memmo to his neighbour at table, "the senator is amazingly condescending, methinks!"

"It is easy to condescend," replied the person addressed, in a yet lower tone, "to a rival on the eve of departure."

"I don't exactly understand you, Lanfranco," rejoined Memmo, on whom his wine had somewhat told, and who at best was obtuse to everything but his own perfections.

"You will understand it, peradventure, to-morrow," was the careless reply of the chevalier; who, adroitly changing the conversation, quickly succeeded in otherwise directing the attention of his flushed and disordered companion.

To the festivities of the youthful admiral, however, the approach of night of course put an early end. After a libation to the safety and success of their youthful entertainer, the splendid company descended into their own yachts to return to the city; the lights of whose marble palaces had for some time been lost to sight from the decks of the galleys. A salvo of artillery was the signal of the departure of the noble guests; and the sound of their oars, and the glimmer of the lights which their vessels carried, were soon lost in the distance. The young chief, having given the orders requisite for the direction of his squadron during the night, now walked the poop of his galley in silence and solitude. For a few minutes before retiring to a short, anxious, and troubled rest, he revolved the strange events amidst which his lot was now cast.

His now almost public engagement to the rich and fascinating Countess Luchesini; the services of his father to the Republic, and his consequent influence in the state of Venice; the unexpected promotion of himself, young as he was, to a command of trust and much importance to a commercial state like that of Venice; his extraordinary adventure connected with the young and beautiful creature whom he had first seen near the Carthusian monastery, and the strange circumstances of her rescue by himself from violence, by turns took possession of his mind. In spite of himself, her form lingered longest in his imagination. The silvery tones and peculiar accent of her voice dwelt in his ear; and the mystery attending her, whilst it perplexed, yet interested him more and more, maugre every effort on his part to dismiss the circumstances from his mind.

These circumstances, whenever they recurred to memory,

seemed in some mysterious manner to connect her fate with his. The embroidered riband and miniature — lost so strangely and found so strangely after his conflict with the ruffians on that solitary quay of the unfrequented canal—the antique ring which she had given him as a memorial of the service he had done—all seemed to unite to link him in some way with this beautiful but mysterious being. Revolving these things he at last retired to his cabin, to lose in the oblivion of a brief repose the conflicting emotions inspired by the time and its accompaniments.

On entering the cabin, in which a dim light only burned, he was suddenly startled by a flash of intense radiance which, glancing through the stern-windows, suddenly and splendidly illuminated the whole apartment. Alarmed and amazed at once by such a phenomenon, he rushed immediately to the window through which the light entered, and by its power he beheld, clearly visible, not only his own galleys, but in the distance the light skiffs of his retiring friends. Gradually it seemed to creep over the surface of the waters that trembled under its radiance, until in the far horizon the towers of the arsenal were for a moment visible. It gradually grew fainter and fainter, and in a few minutes died away; but not until its retiring rays had directed the eyes of the young commander to a scroll, which, apparently as if thrown through the open window, lay upon the floor of the apartment.

Little dreaming that this mysterious but brief illumination was seen by those dear to him as well as by himself, and forgetting the singularity of one circumstance in the surprise of another, to seize upon the scroll was the work of a second, and to open it that of another. It was written in small and delicate characters; and the vellum on which they were impressed bore the marks of foreign origin. The language of the missive thus strangely communicated was pure Italian, although in some respects the style showed the traces of a mind to which other idioms than those of Italy were not unfamiliar. The contents of the scroll ran thus:—

“Signor,—You are an Englishman—not an Italian. Be

warned ! Know that, in Venice, to confide is destruction, to distrust, safety. Know your friends before you think them so. He who distils the upas sometimes perishes by his own alembic. He who sets snares for others sometimes intoils his own feet and speeds those he would ensnare. So may it be with you, if your ears can hearken to good counsel. Fear not because you know not whence it comes. The first day was the child of night. Now mark me, Raymond Delancy. Enter not the gulf of Spezzia until the twenty-eighth day of the moon. But be there and at hand to enter it on that day. Be all eye and ear. The event, be assured, will repay your care. It will teach you a lesson which few men ever learn—that unknown friends are often the best. Adieu !”

The missive was not signed. No name was appended to it ; but it bore that which to the astonished Raymond Delancy seemed almost equivalent. Attached to it, and deeply impressed upon the wax which carried it, was the impression of a seal, the device of which was no stranger to the eye that now gazed upon it with a thrill of startled but pleased astonishment. It was the same as that of the ring which the fair and beautiful unknown had given him on the night of her rescue from the ruffians. There could not, then, be room for great doubt in the mind of the astounded young man as to the source of this strange communication ; but this knowledge only served to bewilder him the more. What means could she, the beautiful but youthful unknown, if she it was, have of giving counsel thus under circumstances so strange ? What could she know, or how come to know it ? Might not the whole be the device of an enemy in secret guise ? From this last supposition, however, his heart instinctively recoiled ; and amidst conflicting emotions that forbade sleep, Raymond at length retired to a restless couch, to leave it on the first dawn of morn.

The day that rose did not lessen the young man’s perplexity of mind and spirit. Again and again he perused the writing of which he had so singularly become possessed ; but as he read, his mind wavered to and fro between conflicting conclusions. Now he leaned to deem it inconsistent with his

grave and public trust to be swayed by a writing emanating from such a source. Now he began to fancy it might be the instrument of a beneficent and all-seeing providence to save him from the secret passes of dark but experienced enmity. How was he to decide? Counsellors he had none; for the missive was not of a nature to allow of its being imparted to any one. At length, however, the romantic and sanguine temperament of youth prevailed. His mind gradually, in its own despite, became impressed with the truth of a mysterious but clear warning, successfully though mysteriously conveyed to his hand whom it most concerned. The counsel given contradicted no order which he had received from the marine executive of the Republic; and as days wore away the young commander felt himself unconsciously obeying its dictates, and anxious lest any untoward accident should prevent a compliance with the point most pressed upon him.

That some strange enterprise was meditated on the twenty-eighth day of the moon became almost a settled conviction of his mind; and more than once, though his orders were general, he inwardly trembled at occurrences which might seem in the eyes of his officers—keen observers as they naturally were of their young and favoured commander—in their consequences to draw him away from the now settled purpose of his mind. The first sentences of this mystic communication, however flattering, possibly, to his vanity, were yet totally enigmatical. In what way was this counsel to baffle enmity, supposing good faith really to have prompted the epistle? This was a riddle that time only could solve; and to time the young commander was perforce content to leave it. The directions so strenuously urged in the mysterious scroll he now resolved, at all risks, to obey; and the course he took had this in view secretly as its result.

The march of events favoured the secret resolves of the youthful commander. No circumstance occurred to draw the galleys under his command from the course destined for them. The cruisers of the enemy, which so often infested, to the great detriment of the Venetian commerce, this portion of the Adriatic, seemed for some reason to have deserted it.

Whether they had obtained secret tidings of the sailing of the galleys of the young Raymond Delancy or not, could not of course be known. The Italian coast of the Adriatic was, however, now apparently uninfested by them; nor in such stretches out into the more open sea as Delancy made, did he fall in with a single hostile sail. The singularity of this circumstance was not left unobserved by him whom it most concerned. It only served to confirm him in his resolution not to pass the point indicated in the mysterious missive until the hour there named. He reflected that this apparent desertion of this portion of the coast might only have for its object, to put vigilance off its guard for some ulterior object. It was only, therefore, on the night of the twenty-seventh day of the moon that the galley of the young Delancy, guided alone by the light of the stars, neared the last promontory which forms the extremity of the Spezzian Gulf.

During the whole day he had kept his galleys close in by the land; and now lying on the very shadow of the cliffs of which that headland is composed, he had taken the precaution to send forward two row-boats, well armed, to double the cape after nightfall, with instructions to make instant signal should anything more than common occur.

For some hours no intelligence reached the galleys. The night was now wearing towards morning, and the young man, impatient and anxious, and rendered every hour more and more so by doubt and suspense, fearing he had been deceived by some sinister plot, prepared to move his galleys further from the land, when a blue light, thrown up from a distance, quickly followed by two more, showed that the advanced row-boats called for instant support. The night-breeze was light, but was luckily in favour of the young admiral; who, making use both of sails and oars, quickly shot past the promontory which lay between him and his boats, and thus rendered the communication with them easy and rapid. It was soon apparent to those on board the Venetian galleys—which, having recalled their boats, now with the wind on their lee, passed rapidly down the gulf—that other persons were that night engaged in making signals more earnestly

than themselves. As the land gradually narrowed in, and those on the mast of the galley most ahead could command the bottom of the gulf in the distance, it became evident, through the gloom, that some alarm was given, and some action going on. Several signal-rockets, similar to those used by the Ottomans, were observed to mount into the sky. More than one dim light, like those of signal-fires, gleamed in the distance. They multiplied; and from the shore to windward, from which the morning breeze now began to blow steadily, the reverberations of bells tolling were heard faintly and at intervals. To these indications at length succeeded another more marked in character. A dull reverberating echo rolled along the waters; another shortly succeeded; and it now became evident that even artillery of some description had been resorted to. The young Raymond Delancy now began to be convinced that his mysterious intelligencer had not played him false. It became more and more obvious that some enterprise of an unusual sort was in progress.

The Venetian galleys, now fully prepared for action, crowded all their canvas and plied every oar to the utmost strength of the wretched captives who pulled them; and their suspense, which had now reached its height, was soon at an end. A faint light appeared on the leeward; another was seen, upon which Delancy immediately bore down, followed by his captains. The morning now began to dawn, and in the course of half an hour Raymond could distinctly recognise two large galleys, apparently Turkish, which were making out to sea.

By a commander like the young and brave Raymond Delancy, no time was required for determination. The wind was in his favour. They could not escape him; and the young Englishman at once resolved to intercept and engage them should they prove to be enemies. This doubt, if it ever had existence, was soon determined. Finding evasion now impossible, the opposing squadron hoisted the Ottoman flag, and palpably prepared to effect by force that passage which no manœuvre could procure for them; whilst Delancy

on his side, determined to board the headmost galley, though superior in size to his own, slackened not his speed, but ran alongside of her with the resolve of one to whom victory or death is the alternative, leaving to his captains the capture of the other.

The resistance of the Turk was desperate. Enraged, apparently, at being thus intercepted just when they had made sure of a rich booty, both captain and crew fought like men determined upon either victory or death. All, however, was in vain. The Venetian galley, commanded by Raymond, though smaller in size, was loftier than her opponent. The Venetians, therefore, laying their galley alongside the Turkish corsair, boarded her, and though not superior in numbers, the event was not long in suspense. Raymond Delancy, burning with all the ardour of youth for distinction and fame, had singled out the Ottoman commander, who was, with the most resolute of the infidels, defending the quarter-deck of the Turkish galliot against numbers becoming irresistible by success and the daring that attends it. Their scimitars crossed, when, to the astonishment of the young Englishman, the Turkish chief, declining the combat and uttering a few rapid accents of encouragement to his men, disappeared, having rapidly descended the ladder which led to the cabin of his vessel.

Raymond, guessing from this circumstance that something desperate was intended by the Turk, whose bravery he could not doubt, pressed forward with the boldest of his followers, to prevent if possible the design of the Ottoman chief, whatever it might be. He was just in time. As the Turkish crew, dispirited by their captain's disappearance, gave way—some leaping overboard to avoid slavery or a better fate from the scimitars of the Venetians, piercing shrieks ascended from the cabin, and the cries of "*miser cordia*," by female voices, startled the ear and nerved the resolution of young Raymond; who, regardless of consequences, precipitated himself down the stair of the cabin sword in hand, ordering his lieutenant to continue the combat above.

On entering the cabin, a scene presented itself enough to

sting into rage the calmest mind, and which overset at once even the habitual stern composure of the young English soldier. On the sofa, in a fainting state, lay a young female richly dressed, and evidently of high rank; her hair dishevelled, and her disordered dress in some places stained with blood. Beside her, on the floor, evidently bleeding to death from a deep stab in the side, but still grasping her mistress's hand, was stretched a young female attendant; whilst another apparently older, and also wounded, grasped and clung round the knees of the Turk; who, foaming with vindictive rage and demoniacal excitement, his countenance distorted, and his whole frame quivering with conflicting passions, was striving, with a poniard in hand, to approach his beautiful victim, now in another moment about to fall into his clutch.

The young Englishman was, however, not too late. One blow of his scimitar, dealt with the utmost energy of a powerful arm, stretched the Ottoman chief, mortally stricken and expiring, upon the floor of the cabin; whilst Raymond, striving to arouse the young captive from her fainting state, assured her of safety, which the cessation of the noise of the combat above, proved to have been attained by the efforts of his crew and their leaders.

Consigning his lovely charge for a moment to the care of her surviving attendant, whose hurt was slight, Raymond regained the deck of the galliot, which he found in possession of his Venetians. He also had the gratification to behold her companion strike her flag to the two smaller Venetian galleys which had attacked her on each side, so that his triumph was complete. His next care was, to administer to the recovery of those whom he had rescued, and to inquire into the meaning of the extraordinary events which had taken place, and of which he had been favoured with a warning so true and at once so strange.

The first care of the young and well-feeling Raymond Delancy, after achieving this welcome victory, was to look after the welfare, and to attend to the comforts of the fair being whom he had been so fortunate as to rescue from death, or a fate far worse than death. The leech or surgeon,

whom the care of the great maritime Republic at that period attached to every large war-galley, had reported favourably of the state of the fair inmate (as she now was) of the cabin of the youthful commander, who, with all courtesy, had directed her removal thither, and respectfully appropriated it to her use. Of her surviving attendant's hurt, he also spoke hopefully; but to preserve the life of the other was beyond his skill, so fatal had been the rage of the excited and lawless ruffian, whom she had devotedly but vainly striven to resist.

His next anxiety was, to learn the name and rank of the lady to whom he had afforded a service so welcome. Neither were altogether unknown to him; though, up to that hour, he had never seen their fair and famous possessor. Raymond Delancy, in short, had the inexpressible satisfaction of learning that he had rescued from barbarian outrage, one whom a flattering fame had for some time given out as one of the most accomplished and fascinating beauties of Italy—the Princess Leonora di Santa Croce, niece of the cardinal of that name; and that the corsair, whose daring and audaciously but deeply planned enterprise he had baffled, was the once celebrated Yussuf Pacha, the favourite of the young Sultan; to whose bed, in return first for pardon granted, and next for honours bestowed, he had sworn he would bring the most accomplished beauty Italy could boast. And right cunningly had the audacious and fearless adventure been planned by the daring renegade whose reckless spirit had conceived it.

Aware that in the vicinity of the beautiful coast of the Gulf of Spezzia, the family of Santa Croce possessed a villa, to which the princess was known to be partial as an autumnal retreat, the Ottoman, in pursuance of his design, had caused for a length of time all marauding visits by Turkish cruizers to be discontinued. Freed gradually, and for a long period, from the visits of these ferocious and roving freebooters, the inhabitants of this portion of the Italian coast had gradually relapsed into security; their superstition attributing to the interposition of a patron saint, an immunity which was in

truth the result of a deep and black design ; and into this false confidence had gradually been lulled even the aged Cardinal di Santa Croce, whose family, together with himself, as one of the most famed of Venetian ministers and negotiators, was peculiarly obnoxious to the Ottoman Porte. Lulled by this false notion of security, the Princess Leonora had again ventured to sojourn at a place which, however beautiful, she had hitherto forborne almost to visit, even for a day ; so exposed was it to the daring inroads with which the Turkish maritime plunderers of that period harassed and devastated the least defensible positions of the coast of Italy.

Of the success, thus far, of his cruel scheme, Yussuf had, by means of his spies, full intelligence ; and he now resolved to follow it to the end. Manning two of his swiftest galliots with picked men, armed at all points, he seized the opportunity of a dark autumnal night to land upon a point of the coast from which the Villa di Santa Croce, where the princess was then staying in a fancied security, was most accessible. The enterprise, well concerted as it was, completely succeeded. So well did the pacha's guides know the country, that they contrived to conduct him and his small, but brave and well armed band, without discovery, to the villa of the princess. There the first alarm took place. The domestics were all armed ; and they were not few, though no match for the intrepid brigands whom it was their duty to have resisted.

The result was, that the villa being completely surrounded, and every avenue for escape closed by armed sentinels, the remainder of the pacha's cohort, headed by himself, broke, after a short resistance, into the chateau, where, seizing upon the princess and two of the handsomest of her female attendants, who were destined to a kindred fate, they hurried them, under cover of the gloom, to the sea-side ; setting fire to the deserted villa, in order to draw off attention from their own proceedings. Having reached the coast just at daybreak, without any effectual opposition being made, the princess was conducted on board the vessel of the pacha ; who, im-

mediately followed by his confederate, put to sea with his beautiful prize, in full confidence of having fulfilled his cruel engagement with his master the sultan. In this, however, he was doomed not only to be disappointed, but to atone with his life for this outrage against the peace of an unoffending lady.

Thus far all was easily explicable. The mystery was to conceive by what strange agency Raymond had been thus enabled, in the very minute of its success, to disconcert a scheme so secret in its conception and so daringly and rapidly executed. It was in vain that the young Englishman paced the quarter-deck of his galley, wrapped in deep reflection, and occupied with strong but unavailing endeavours to discover some clue to the secret and extraordinary agency by which he had so opportunely been brought upon the scene in which he had just played a part so happy. To the mysterious young beauty whom he had rescued from violence, his suspicions naturally reverted; to be as often, in turn, abandoned. It was impossible to fancy that between a being so young and a veteran Turkish marauder any intercourse could subsist; yet, without supposing this, what room was there for the supposition that the anonymous warning and direction could originate in such a source? From an idea to him so revolting the heart of Raymond Delancy instinctively shrank; but relinquishing this, no conceivable path to even a possible solution of the difficulty remained.

In the midst of these bewildering thoughts the young Englishman, however, had one certain consolation; he soon became aware that, in saving the Princess di Santa Croce, he had performed a service which must give him some favour with more than one of the rulers of the stern though luxurious maritime Republic. The Princess Leonora might be called the only surviving niece and near relative of the aged minister and Cardinal of Santa Croce. An elder sister she had; but this sister circumstances had induced many years before to assume the veil. Subsequently, the only brother of the princess lost his life in the wars, with which about that period Italy was scourged. Her father, the Prince di

Santa Croce, quickly followed his son to the tomb ; and the Princess Leonora, the inheritrix of more than one rich lordship in her own right, remained the sole surviving relative of her father's brother the cardinal, who was strongly attached to her as the last representative of his house. He had superintended her education with great care ; and she had attended him on several of those missions and embassies with which he had been from time to time intrusted, sometimes by the Holy Father, sometimes by the Council of Ten. The consequence of this position was, that the young princess soon came to be regarded, not only as one of the most beautiful, but as one of the most accomplished ladies of the age. She understood and could speak, with more or less correctness, several languages. For literature she had a decided love ; and her acquaintance with books was, at that era, considered in a female as extraordinary. In fact, it was so in an age when literature was in few and mostly in clerical hands, and when the nobility divided their time between war and dissipation for the most part.

Thus nurtured, and thus acquainted, far better than most females of that time, with the world and its various phases, Leonora di Santa Croce had learned, without being aware of it, to think for herself, and to entertain feelings and opinions unknown to the great majority of Italian women at that period. This freedom of thinking and almost masculine decision of mind, however, the extreme mildness of her manners and the soft placidity of her disposition entirely veiled. Her speculative turn had produced in both mind and manners a tendency to a gentle and refined seriousness, sometimes approaching to melancholy, rather than any appearance of decision or activity of intellect ; and whilst in the seductive and brilliant Countess Luchesini the active politician was sometimes apparent, the intellectual power of the gentle Princess di Santa Croce was hidden by the truly feminine modesty and softness of her character. So gifted by nature and so accomplished by education, she was accounted one of the stars of Italy, and not less for her own sake than that of her great fortune and high connexions, her hand had been

sought by some of the most ambitious nobles of her country, amongst whom, it was whispered, was the Marquis Spinelli.

Hitherto, however, she had been sought in vain. For this various reasons had been assigned, according to the foregone conclusions of those who ventured to give them. By some it was said that the political combinations of his eminence the cardinal her uncle had prevented or broken off several eligible matches, to which, under other circumstances, the princess might have yielded her sanction. By others it was said that the ideas of the princess were too refined, and her intellectual acquirements too exalted for an everyday world, even in cultivated Italy. By some few it was whispered that her ideas on the delicate topic of marriage were not those of her country, but eccentric and romantic. Be this as it might, however, it was certain that none of the many admirers of the princess had succeeded in making an impression upon her heart.

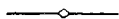
It had been indeed asserted by some of his many friends, that, if any man appeared to have a chance to win her affections, that man was the powerful and intellectual Marquis Spinelli; but there was nothing in the conduct of that nobleman to give rise to any suspicion that he entertained this opinion. That she respected his talents and general strength of character, he felt; but in his intercourse with herself and her relative the cardinal, he rather treated her with the profound deference which is created by beauty when allied to striking accomplishments and mental powers, than with the devotion which lovers, on the way to success, evince.

Such was the character and such the history of the fair refugee, to whom it was the young Englishman's rare fortune now to yield protection. This duty he performed with all the practical courtesy and profuse kindness for which his nation were, at that era, remarkable. He had immediately dedicated his own cabin to the use of the princess; and turning to account the rich and luxurious fittings of the Turkish Admiral's ship, now one of his prizes, he was enabled to furnish it after a fashion which his own simpler resources would not have allowed.

He had ascertained through the attendant of her highness that she wished to proceed direct to Venice with the squadron, which the necessity of disposing of his prizes and the remainder of their crews compelled to return to port. It was also necessary that he should replace the men whom he had lost in the short but desperate action which ended in the capture of the Ottomans; and under these circumstances he accordingly lost no time in bending his course again up the Adriatic, now clear of pirates or hostile rovers of any description.

Raymond had, with a considerateness perhaps unusual at his years, refrained hitherto from seeking an interview with the fair being who, by so singular a fortune, had become an inmate of his vessel. His sense of dignified politeness had taught him to leave it to the princess to fix the time for awarding him those acknowledgments which he could not but feel were owing.

The accomplished lady was not slow to feel the refined and chivalrous feelings which led the young Englishman to treat, as if it were a trifle, a service which certainly could not be overrated; nor was she tardy in proving how deeply she appreciated the gallant courtesy of her deliverer.



CHAPTER XIV

GRATITUDE BEGETS LOVE.

THE first few hours of Raymond's homeward voyage towards Venice were roughened by one of those brief but violent equinoctial gales to which the Mediterranean, including the Adriatic, is so subject. The gale was, however, as suddenly followed by a dead calm, in which no breath of air ruffled the blue mirror of the waters. As the sun climbed high in the heavens, the surface of the sea gradually became as one sheet of burnished gold. The sails, which hung uselessly from the yards, were speedily clewed up; whilst the rowers,

exhausted by the heat, slowly impelled the little fleet through the waters, Raymond's vessel leading the way.

The night was scarcely less brilliant though less oppressive than the day. A luxurious languor still pervaded the air, but it was cool and comparatively refreshing as it obeyed the scarcely perceptible undulations of the now quiet and tranquil Adriatic, whose wavelets were hardly seen to stir as they reflected back the silver shine of the clear broad autumnal moon, presiding like an empress over the silent deep blue heavens sparely sprinkled with stars.

It was towards the close of the second day, when, the first watch being set, it was understood that the young commandant had some leisure space for such an interview, that he was courteously summoned to the presence of his fair and illustrious guest. To his mind such an interview could not but be deeply interesting; and the youthful chief was not slow in following the female attendant of the princess to the presence of her mistress.

Raymond found the princess seated on a rich sofa, which had been placed there for her especial use. As the day was now declining, the cabin was lighted by a single lamp, suspended from the ceiling; but the rising moon, darting her clear beams through the window behind, almost overcame the light of the lustre within, and produced that clear yet silvery though uncertain light, by which, though much is revealed to the eye, much is left to the imagination. As the princess rose to receive him, the clear radiance of the lamp was strongly thrown upon her face and figure, and few more striking of their kind had ever been contemplated by Raymond Delaney.

The figure of the princess was of the middle size, inclined somewhat to *embonpoint*, but not by any means so as to injure its symmetry, which was perfect of its kind. She wore a silken tunic, which was an undress of the time, and which was confined to her exquisitely turned waist by an embroidered belt: with which exception her attire was plain, displaying a neck beautifully fair, ornamented only by a simple necklace of large and valuable pearls, to which was

suspended a small cross, minutely and curiously carved, apparently of ivory. Her hair, which was of a rich glossy brown, was confined by a broad but simple band of pearls set in silver tissue, and so arranged as to show her high and beautiful forehead, which was perhaps the most remarkable portion of her face;—clear, majestic, full of contemplative thought, and polished as the marble.

Her eyes, unlike those of the generality of her countrywomen, were of a clear hazel;—mild and reflective, but when she smiled, full of an intellectual light that was inexpressibly sweet, and rendered her smile, perhaps, more captivating than that of any other woman of her time and country. At other times, they were remarkable for a soft melancholy cast, which was indeed that of her countenance when not excited or engaged in conversation. Her nose was Grecian rather than Italian; straight, descending finely from the clear forehead, and exquisitely formed. The upper lip was sharply curved and short; and the mouth, though generally deemed somewhat too full, redeemed by the rich coral of the lips, and a set of teeth so remarkable for elegance and for the pure ivory of their whiteness, as at once to make the severest critic forget the slight disproportion which existed.

In short, the beauty of the princess was of that sort that insensibly grows upon the eye of him who contemplates it. The intellectual sweetness of the general expression, on a first view, overcame the beautiful contour of the features, which was only, afterwards, fully appreciated by the gazer when the first fascination had somewhat passed away.

Such was the beautiful apparition that greeted the eyes of the young Raymond Delancy on entering the cabin of his vessel: and self-possessed as it was his temperament to be, he almost started as his eyes rested on the vision which now met them. Nor was the princess altogether unmoved by the sight of her preserver. As she rose from her sofa to receive him, a slight blush suffused her cheeks and her brow; nor could she help being struck by the manly bearing of her visitor, full of deference as it was, mixed with the dignified carriage and appearance of independence indicative of his nation.

After apologising briefly for some of the circumstances which had necessarily delayed the interview, "I must now, signor," continued the princess, "attempt that which I yet feel to be impossible,—to convey to you a sense of gratitude for an inappreciable service, too deep for words of mine to be capable of expressing it."

"Any words, signora, from such lips," gallantly replied the young Englishman, "would be guerdon enough, methinks, for any service."

"Ah! signor," rejoined the princess, motioning to her guest to be seated, "I fear me this air of Italy has already had its effect, and when truth shrinks back abashed, you have learned how to make up the largess with compliments."

"We are ill at that, even were it needed, fair lady," answered Raymond, "in the country whence I come."

The princess smiled; mournfully somewhat, as it appeared to Raymond.

"I am not ignorant, signor, of that country," she said "and I have now learned by experience that its sons have other and better accomplishments. Well for me that I have done so."

"Your highness is pleased to say so; but I fear me our English accomplishments can hardly pass for such in the eyes of a lady of Italian climes," answered Raymond. "When refinement is wanting, I am not to learn that even desert, where it exists, loses half its value."

"Alas! sir," said the princess, "then how shall we think of those who, retaining the refinement which is the gilding, let the substance which is the virtue go? But," continued she gaily, "let me boast so far as to claim for myself some knowledge both of your country and your country's manners: nor can I hear England nor its literature run down even by one of England's sons. I have heard, signor, of your Gower and your Chaucer; and I have read the sonnets of Surrey to his Geraldine; nor am I ignorant of the young fame of Philip Sidney."

"These are stars, lady," answered Raymond, "distantly and faintly twinkling in an overclouded and too often tempest-

laden sky. Before the bright galaxy of the genius of Italy they fade and wane, and are seen no more."

"And do you lament this, Sir Englishman?" asked the princess, somewhat hastily.

"Doubtless, lady," was the reply.

A melancholy smile passed over the beautiful brow of the fair speaker.

"He who throws away sorrow," said she, "throws away a jewel that he has not learned how to value. Take care, signor, that such is not your case."

"Pardon me, lady! But to me you speak in riddles," returned Delancy, in some wonder at an expression so enigmatical.

"You shall yourself expound them," rejoined the Lady Leonora, with a faint smile. "To the son of an English baron the history of this fair clime of ours—this garden of Italy as it has been fondly termed—must be known. I mean the annals of its elder time, as well as those of its more modern—what shall I term it?—degradation."

"That history, signora, is not unknown to me," replied Raymond, still lost in surprise at these bitter words from lips so sweet; "but I shrink from applying such a word to any portion of it."

"You are catching our modern refinement, signor," hastily replied the princess. "But let us not be deceived by fair words. In that olden time—the earlier day of Roman liberty—when that assembly of conscript fathers, each with his ivory wand, bowed his head in calmness to the murderous blade of the barbarian Gaul, rather than do or say aught to sully the majesty of the Republic,—was not that refinement?"

The young Englishman bowed assent. In fact he was too much startled by the change which now came over the tones and features of the fair speaker to do more.

"Yes!" continued the princess, her beautiful eyes beaming a clear fire as she spoke; "the refinement of men whose pursuits were the pursuits of men—their country's liberty and their country's greatness. What more could such men need? Was some effeminate song, twangled to the lyre, a

pastime for a Cincinnatus? Was Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, lured, think you, by a soft serenade?"

Delancy again failed to reply.

"Ah! no, signor," continued the princess, suddenly lowering her tone. "Were not these refinements, as we term them, reserved for other times? The Roman virtue waned; and then came the lampoons of Ennius, and the cold atheism of Lucretius, and Catiline and Cæsar plotted the parricide of their country."

"'Tis too true, lady!" faltered the young Englishman, in utter wonderment as to whither this discourse was tending.

"There was a struggle, but it was a brief one," continued the princess;—"and then—then came refinement and Pharsalia and Philippi."

"Should we join these things as in kindred, signora?" deferentially remarked the young Englishman. "Is it fair—is it just to do so?"

"They have joined themselves," replied the speaker emphatically. "Was Pharsalia avenged? No. It but became the theme of a poet who was repaid by murder; and the cowardice of Philippi was turned into a jest by another, to flatter the tyrant whom it had helped to set up."

"This is a bitter philosophy to fall from such lips," unthinkingly responded the young man.

The princess paused a moment, and then replied in a mournful, but, as Raymond thought, somewhat upbraiding tone—"The sentiment, signor, is Venetian; and as such I must accept it."

"And would the Princess di Santa Croce have it otherwise?" gently asked the young Englishman of the beautiful enthusiast, as she now seemed to him to be.

"Italy is my country," responded she, with dignity. "Be it so. But can it be a fault in your eyes, whose country is not Italy," she continued, laying a marked emphasis on the words—"if I do sometimes wish my countrymen to be as men once were rather than as they now are?"

To this appeal the young Englishman could make no reply. He was, in truth, frequently so far subdued and spell-bound

by the converse of his fascinating but extraordinary guest, that reply, in any ordinary sense of the word, was almost beyond his power. Nor was this to be wondered at.

This style of conversation, however becoming the rank, talents, and graces of the fair interlocutrix, was unusual in the female society into which his residence in Venice had brought the young soldier; and he had quitted England too early to see or appreciate such freedom of thought and expression as was, at that era, customary amongst the educated of his own countrywomen. He had been taught, too, to look at freedom of opinion with dread, not to say distaste; and young in experience, and unlearned in the phenomena of mind, he was sometimes startled when it came unexpectedly upon him from a quarter in which his young judgment least expected to meet with it. In fact he recoiled bewildered from the very shadow of freedom of thought, when that shadow seemed to tend upon words uttered by the Princess di Santa Croce, the darling of her uncle the cardinal and minister, the guardian of the faith as well as of the counsels of Venice, looked up to by all Italy as the jealous inquisitor as well as the politic minister; unaware, in the simplicity of a trusting nature, that doubt oftentimes nestles securest, and therefore most surely, in bosoms nearest the shrine from which it is supposed to be farthest.

Had Raymond been endowed with less of self-distrust and more of the vanity natural to fewness of years, he might have interpreted the compliments, which the beautiful princess sometimes seemed to pay his country, as meant for himself in their application, though general in their wording: but this the simpler honesty of his temperament forbade. And hence, in the course of those conversations, by which the interesting companion of his voyage naturally sought to relieve the monotony of shipboard, and haply sometimes to ward off that gloom which those unused to such scenes could not but feel when the sun sank, and the shadow of night brooded over the waters, he sometimes involuntarily shrank from allusions which, however flattering in themselves, he himself would have guarded with reservations that were omitted by the fair

and noble Italian, in whom they would have seemed most natural.

Whether the finely toned mind of the princess could fail to fathom the mental movements of her less accomplished auditor, may admit of a doubt; but certain it was she never chose to seem to do so. On the contrary, she appeared to look on the young Raymond as one who had cast his lot in deference to parental influence rather than internal inclination, and to whom recollections of home might be painful in the very proportion in which they were sweet.

"It sometimes grieves me, signor," observed the princess, on one of those occasions for converse with the young Englishman of which she never omitted to avail herself, "to allude to that country to which you seem to have bid so long a farewell, lest I excite remembrances which may be painful in their contrast with that which you must now witness in that of your adoption."

"Alas! signora," replied the young man, mournfully, "painful these remembrances may be—but hardly from contrast—being sufficiently sad in themselves. Who would not shrink from remembering a country torn by dissensions where there should be peace,—the too-trusting people deserted by their too-trusted leaders,—the legislature bribed by unholy bribes, or overawed by unhallowed authority,—the rulers headlong, reckless, and fearing nothing;—who, lady, would not shrink from such remembrance, and for its own painfulness?"

The princess paused for a few moments, as if revolving something in her mind, after which she said, with more rapidity than was usual to her,—“And have you, signor, yet to learn that, where freedom of mind is, there must be contention of mind? The constant accord of which men talk springs from mental slavery or mental weakness only. True, the light rack ever flies before the prevailing wind; but the thunder-cloud braves and countersails the tempest.”

The momentary light that glanced from the beautiful eyes of the fair speaker, as she gave utterance to this sentiment, so far startled Raymond that he paused and hesitated ere he could rejoin:—

"'Tis true, lady. But before the warrant of supreme authority, opinion ceases to have place."

"Not until that same opinion has pronounced upon the validity of the warrant," rejoined the princess.

The young soldier was puzzled—bewildered—by converse so totally unaccustomed, and from a quarter so unexpected. He was neither casuist nor logician. On abstract questions he had never been accustomed to reason; and hence against the finesse of the accomplished opponent whom he now encountered—dazzling, astute, but gentle and singularly fascinating as it was in its novelty—he had no defence to make.

"But to all opinion there must be limits," at length he ventured to say,—“must there not? and where reason ends the irrational must begin?”

"To every created thing God the Omniscient has assigned limits," answered the princess in a tone of gentle but deep solemnity; "save only to Himself, the illimitable because the uncreated, who is without limit."

"In saying that, fair lady," returned the young soldier, "you have said all I would say."

"Hardly so, methinks," rejoined the princess; "at least, I fear so."

Raymond paused, again puzzled and bewildered by the extraordinary turn the singular colloquy had taken. The princess looked at him and then resumed:—

"To all human contemplations, conceptions, apprehensions, and reasonings, the Omniscient has assigned limits. But has He assigned to men the faculty to define and fix? Where the rational ends the irrational must begin. Be it so; but who has ever fixed the point of that end and that beginning? No one save the All-seeing, who hath ordered that thus it shall be."

"These refinements and abstractions, lady, are surely beyond our range," objected the young commander, in a low tone.

"They are so; and for that very reason we should refuse to rest inferences, much more acts, upon them. The im-

perfect cannot comprehend, not even see, the perfect; and hence, in the glass of human intellect, all is more or less crude and confused. That which we know perpetually merges that which we cannot know."

"'Tis too true, lady," said Raymond, hesitatingly; "but should not this teach us humility?"

A bitter smile passed over the pale countenance of the princess, and changed for the moment the radiant expression of her countenance.

"Ask those, signor," replied she, "the business of whose life it is to bring into dispute that which they themselves cannot settle, even for themselves. 'Humility,' say you, fair sir? Ask the casuists, the logicians,—the moralists, *par excellence*, if they have learned it? To me, I confess, it matters little," continued the princess. "Let them dispute. Only let them learn"—(and again a keen and bitter smile flitted across those beautiful features)—"not to take dungeons and gibbets and torches for arguments."

"These are perilous themes, lady!" faltered Raymond, in deep and irrepressible amazement, which he could not even manage to conceal.

"And who are they that make them so?" asked the princess in quiet irony. "The enlightened disputants themselves, who have yet to be taught that difference of opinion and freedom of opinion are yet synonymous terms, and so must continue. This was once, and I trust yet may be, understood in that country of which you ought to be proud to be a native, but which I must be content to envy; knowing as I do, that where the soul of man is free, the mind of woman cannot be a slave."

To this eloquent and extraordinary appeal, the astonished Englishman could only bow in silent acquiescence. Young as he was,—novice as he was in all that relates to the female character, he yet possessed native penetration enough to see that there were hidden in the fair bosom before him feelings and emotions which he dared not and ought not to probe further. Silent as he was, partly in surprise and partly in awe, he could not prevent rushing into his mind the tales he

had been told of the fair being over whose life and welfare an adventure so mysterious had made him for a time protector. All he had heard of the high independent spirit with which her rank and wealth as well as her temperament and education had endued her,—of her lofty bearing,—her refusal of so many noble offers,—her deeply cherished opinions,—her commanding genius, and still more commanding and singular beauty ;—all this rushed into his mind, and made him feel how unequal he was to sustain his part in such a scene.

Whilst, however, seizing some casual excuse of duty to end a conversation so deeply oppressive to him, nurtured as he had been in opinions so opposite in their tendency to those which he had just heard, it was impossible not to admire the noble and majestic freedom of bearing of the fascinating being who gave them utterance ; nor to avoid feeling flattered by the confidence so freely placed in a youth and a stranger ; nor to prevent the reflection that it was possible that, not only his English birth, but his English nobility of form, manners, and disposition, might have helped to impress his beautiful guest with a partiality she cared not so far to conceal.

It was with these conflicting feelings that the young soldier left the presence of the princess ; nor did reflection tend to diminish them. He had soon begun to perceive in her demeanour and expression symptoms of the expression of a latent melancholy utterly at variance with her youth, her remarkable beauty, her vast wealth, and high birth. Its cause he could not even venture to guess ; but yet the conviction was irresistible, that, possessed of youth, of every female charm, of the influence of birth and the power of wealth and territorial possessions, she was yet dissatisfied with her position. Nor could he be totally unaware that in him, a stranger and a foreigner, she had deigned to place a confidence unenjoyed by many who might claim a deeper interest in her favour. To a youth tossed on the world by misfortune, the position was new and strange, and he felt it so. But admiration and wonder, rather than any more

tender emotion, disturbed the usual tranquillity of his breast, and broke his usually quiet slumbers. Nor was the feeling predominant in his waking hours altogether divested of a dim sense of awe. So many mysterious links seemed connecting themselves with his humble fortunes, that he almost feared to ask whither they might lead him. Confused and perplexed, in a conflict of thought, he was unable to conclude anything; and neither knew how to shape or how to enter-tain the destiny that might be in store for him.

The return voyage of the squadron of the young commander was, by various unavoidable circumstances, rendered tediously long. The necessity of distributing his men amongst his prizes had made his crews short of their complement; and this was aggravated by his loss of men in the short but desperate action that preceded the capture of the Turkish corsairs. The weather also was baffling in the extreme: those dead calms common in the Adriatic in the autumnal season were succeeded generally by contrary gales from the land, brief but violent, succeeded by other calms.

During this lengthened period, the young Englishman perceived, with deep regret and pity, that the tendency to a secret melancholy, which he soon began to detect in converse with the princess, gradually increased, and was sometimes very apparent in spite of her efforts to conceal it. In the sort of converse common amongst the females of her country, she was too highly accomplished to take interest. The company of her only female attendant, consequently, did little to relieve the *ennui* of a lengthened and dull voyage.

Whenever his duties permitted Raymond to enter into conversation with his fair guest, the relief and pleasure so afforded were very evident. Indeed, the princess, candid in disposition, and above the artifices too common amongst her sex, disdained to conceal it. These conversations, however, too often took a turn, the consequence of which was to inflict evident discomposure on the mind of the princess; and as she approached the termination of her voyage, this tendency to a morbid and irritable sensitiveness became more and

more manifest. It seemed as if the advantages of birth, station, and riches were regarded by her as evils rather than advantages; and as if she estimated the society of her equals as an infliction and an annoyance, rather than as a benefit or a gratification. These feelings, habitually stifled in her ordinary intercourse with society, seemed to be evoked with irresistible force by the frank converse and courteous but independent and manly bearing of the cool, brave, and handsome young Englishman, so far at variance with the loquacity, grimace, and effeminate trifling of the younger Venetian nobles.

After many days of delay from unavoidable causes, the voyage of Delancy drew near its termination; but not without this tendency in his fair charge becoming more and more apparent, and more and more painful to him; who was thus aware of the mixture of grief and contempt with which this accomplished lady contemplated some of the usages and much of the social habits of her country. The little squadron had now arrived within a few leagues of the queen of maritime cities, and the breeze entirely failing, the young commander gave orders to come to anchor for the night. This order being in course of being carried into effect, the princess, as was not unusual with her when the evening was serene, appeared with her attendant on the quarter-deck of the galley to enjoy the coolness of the hour of sunset; and the young Englishman, having seen his orders executed, approached the poop of the vessel where the princess sat, to pay his respects with the usual frank courtesy of his country and nation.

It was not without some slight but visible emotion that he was received; and having, in reply to a question of the princess, informed her that the squadron was now within a very few hours' sail of the city of Venice, she immediately said with some agitation of manner, "Then let me seize the last opportunity, possibly, I may have, to thank you, signor, however inadequately, for the priceless service you have rendered me."

Had Raymond Delancy not been flattered by the manner

in which these words were spoken by the interesting and lovely being who stood before him, he must have been more or less than man. It was, however, the bent of his disposition to make as light as possible of services rendered to another.

"Pardon me, signora," he rejoined, therefore, in as gay a tone as his real feelings would permit him to assume, "and permit me to remark, that a portion of my guerdon for the mere performance of a duty, however sacred that duty, is yet to come. How many hearts in Venice, lady, will leap to thank me for doing that which not to have done would have required a share of cowardice beyond my power certainly to imagine."

"Alas! signor," rejoined the princess, "I fear me you have sojourned too short a time in yonder den of jealous tyranny and supple subservience, to be aware how completely selfishness has eaten out the better feelings of our nature, and left hardly the hollow semblance of virtues that have long been dead in Venice. Believe me, sir, between the tyrant and the satellite, there is no room for honour, friendship, love, pity, or gratitude. Self alone survives; and they who thank you for preserving me, only do so because they would substitute Italian hypocrisy for barbarian outrage. But you know them not."

Under a mild, collected and calm exterior manner, the young soldier possessed warm feelings, and a heart full of sympathy for others; and it was with no small pain that he remarked the bitter mournfulness of tone in which the princess uttered these sentences, so startling in their nature, so unusual in their tone. Concealing, however, what he inwardly felt, he remarked in a somewhat deprecating tone,—

"Your highness will pardon me if I cannot help fearing that you are judging of the character of your countrymen somewhat harshly." The princess shook her head and smiled sadly, but did not reply.

"How, lady," continued the young soldier, "can a people be destitute of refined feeling and exalted sentiment, or be ignorant of the purity and disinterestedness to which passion may be chastened, whose poets have pourtrayed so beauti-

fully every phase of the human affections, and every emotion of the human heart?"

"There is poetry, signor," rejoined the princess mildly, "in which this is partly done; but is that poetry to be sought for amidst the cold conceits of Petrarca, the coarsenesses of Ariosto, or the *clinquante* of Torquato Tasso?"

"Where is it then to be found, lady," exclaimed the young Englishman hastily, "if not in the poesy of Italy?"

"Perhaps here," rejoined the princess, taking a small volume from the hand of her attendant. "Is this not poetry, signor? Is the pure simplicity of unsophisticated sentiment not breathed forth in these beautiful lines?" Pausing a moment, the princess then read to the young Englishman, in the clear and silvery tones that were natural to her, her slightly foreign accent and intonation by no means detracting from the eloquent beauties of the verse:—

"Tis not the white or red
Inhabits in your cheek, that thus can wed
My mind to adoration; nor your eye,
Though it be full and fair, your forehead high
And smooth as Pelop's shoulder; not the smile
Lies watching in those dimples to beguile
The easy soul; your hands and fingers long,
With veins enamell'd richly; nor your tongue,
Though it spoke sweeter than Arion's harp;
Your woven hair, in many a curious warp,
Able in endless error to enfold
The wandering soul; not the true perfect mould
Of all your body, which as pure doth show
In maiden whiteness as the Alpine snow,—
All these, were but your constancy away,
Would please me less than a black stormy day
The wretched seaman, toiling through the deep.
But while this honour'd strictness you dare keep,
Though all the plagues, that e'er begotten were
In the vast womb of air were settled here
In opposition, I would, like the tree,
Shake off these drops of weakness, and be free
E'en in the arms of danger."

As she recited the closing lines of the impassioned strain, the silver voice of the princess became tremulous and low, in spite of every effort which she made to curb the emotions excited by the verse.

"Has Britain then produced a great poet," faltered the astonished Delaney, "since her white cliffs faded from my view?"

The princess did not audibly answer, but directing to the title-page the eyes of the young soldier, he there read, for the first time, the name of "John Fletcher;" and as he stood ruminating in a bewildered surprise, the princess, without addressing him further, with a graceful gesture of farewell, left the deck with her attendant.

The morning that followed this conversation was to put an end to these interviews, intensely interesting as they could not but be to a young man in the position of Raymond Delaney. Whilst the dim stars were waning before the first bright streaks of the eastern horizon, the squadron weighed anchor. As the morning broke, a fresh and favourable breeze filled every sail and lifted every standard, and before the day was much advanced, the glittering towers and spires of Venice, their gilded ornaments glancing in the rising sun, were visible in the distance, as the mists of morning gradually melted and dispersed.

The news of the seizure of the Princess di Santa Croce by the corsair, and of her rescue by the young officer of the Republic, had preceded the arrival of the squadron by many days. As soon, therefore, as the lighter boats which were on the look-out reported its approach to the city, a crowd of superbly rigged gondolas and barges, the property of the Venetian magnificoes, left the harbour to meet Delaney and his prizes.

Amongst these was the aged cardinal himself, trembling with anxiety and the excitement of a scene now unusual to him, and eager to clasp to his bosom his beautiful niece, the hope of his family and the darling of his old age. Already the distant salvoes of artillery, and the faint noise of the loud military music, announced the approach of the splendid maritime cortège; but the princess was not visible. The delicate modesty of Raymond's character had prevented his seeking an interview with his fair charge, and he began to feel uneasiness lest she should not be informed of the now

near approach of the gorgeous company who were crowding the Adriatic to bid her welcome, when he was suddenly summoned to her presence by her attendant. It may be easily conceived that the young soldier proceeded to her apartment on this sudden summons with a heart not entirely free from palpitation. On entering, with a deferential gesture, the cabin appropriated to the princess, he was struck with her altered manner. Her countenance bore evident traces of sorrow, but its expression was that of calm determination, and a firm resignation to something that, in her mind's eye, seemed inevitable. Motioning her attendant to leave the apartment, she advanced to Raymond, and addressed him in that low but firm tone which betokens a suppressed emotion covered by strength of determinate purpose.

"I have sent for you, signor," she said, "to address to you the last sincere and heartfelt words that it may possibly ever be in my power to utter or in yours to hear. Listen to them,—it is my last request,—but do not attempt to answer. The time presses, and this is no moment to bandy idle and empty compliments. Whether during the short space in which you have sheltered me, I have secured your—your good opinion"—(in saying these words her voice audibly faltered)—"I do not know. All I know is that you, sir, have secured mine. How should it indeed be otherwise? You have done me priceless service, and have hardly appeared to think you deserved my thanks. I know too well"—(and here the voice of the princess faltered again, so powerful became suppressed emotion)—"that it is out of my power to repay you. Had it been otherwise, my mind was not less made up"—(here again she hesitated as unable for the moment to proceed)—"but it is still, sir, my duty to render what reguerdon I can. Signor, I owe you life, or perhaps much more than life. Thanks in such cases are superfluous, but let me repay what I can ——"

She here drew a ring from her finger, and presenting it to the astonished young man, continued,—"**K**ee**p** this; less for my sake than your own; and if ever the hour shall come—and something tells me," she added in a low suppressed

tone, "that it may come, when it may be in my power to render service for service, this shall command it."

As she uttered these last words and tendered the gift, a tear fell upon her hand. The young man, bewildered and excited to the uttermost, kneeling, received the ring and hand at once, which he covered with kisses. His heart felt bursting within him, and though yearning to speak, words and utterance were denied him. It was one of those moments which no man ever encounters twice, and the very remembrance of which confuses, whilst it distracts the sense with a strange mixture of deep grief and keen and impassioned pleasure.

At this moment a loud shout, which echoed over the waters, indicated the close proximity of the Venetian fleet of welcome; and the princess, disengaging her hand and hiding her face to conceal from the youth what she could no longer repress—a passion of tears—motioned him from her presence. Confused, and torn with conflicting emotions, he obeyed; and it was not until his duties called upon him to receive the gorgeous cortège that was to attend him into harbour that he recovered self-possession.

The rest is soon told. The aged cardinal, ascending the side of the galley, welcomed the deliverer of his niece, and tottering to her apartment, with an emotion long unwonted, held her to his bosom in a long and parental embrace.



CHAPTER XV

THE PORTRAIT.

"THAT his good luck is in ample proportion with the rest of his gifts, I suppose you admit," said a voice which no one who had ever heard it, could fail to recognise as that of Albertini, one of those younger Venetian nobles who went to make up the ornamental lumber of every saloon, ball-room, or feasting-hall, frequented by the noblesse of Venice.

"I do so; but without derogating or wishing to derogate from his nobler qualities, of which he has many," replied the Chevalier Lanfranco, who made one of the critical group engaged in this interesting conversation.

"Well, it may be as you are pleased to think," interrupted a weak, shrill pipe, which no one could mistake for the voice of any one but of him who owned it, the effeminate Memmo. "Well, it may be so for aught I know and for aught I care. I never had much faith in these mushroom adventurers, and now I have none; without exactly pretending to those years that are supposed to confer experience. I have seen the end of one or two of them, and hope to see more yet: though, 'pon honour, I make no insinuations," drawled out the speaker languidly, adjusting the rich collar of lace that helped to set off the glossy satin of his black but curiously worked doublet.

"Hush! we may be overheard," cautiously whispered Lanfranco, as a pause occurred in the music with which the room the moment before resounded.

The apartment in which this half-whispered colloquy was going on, was at the moment the scene of a festal entertainment of no usual character. It was of considerable length, and of ample height, but somewhat narrow, the deficiency of width being somewhat relieved by three projecting bay windows; these were carried to the very edge of the water that washed the quayed islet on which they stood, and that commanded a partial sea-view, embracing a part of the roadstead towards the harbour, and only bounded by the distant horizon where the sky and blue Adriatic seemed sometimes to melt into each other. The mansion to which it belonged had, at an earlier period, been built and inhabited by one of the noble families of Venice. It had, however, been long deserted by them, and now formed the home of the exiled Baron Delaney and his family.

This room, and the room adjoining to it, had not until this night, been inhabited by the small household of the baron. Though in part furnished in that style of stately magnificence to which the family of Delaney were accustomed, and

which was still, to some extent, within their power, the absence of the baron, and the precarious health and shattered spirits of the baroness, had not permitted these two apartments to be used as rooms of ceremony; for which they were alone adapted. Their furnishings were in that style of solid and somewhat sombre stateliness common in most European states during that age. Up to a certain height, a panelling of richly carved black oak ran round the room, above which the walls were of stucco, with rich and deep mouldings, corresponding with the oaken carving below, but leaving spaces to be filled by paintings or Venetian mirrors. The hangings were of rich crimson stuffs, with deep fringes, and laces and tassels of gold embroidery. Round the room were couches of carved oak, cushioned with rich crimson stuffs to suit the hangings; and in each window stood a slab of white marble placed upon carved oaken frames of elaborate workmanship, with ottomans on each side. The ceilings were crossed with deeply carved oaken beams, framed within a deep and richly carved but heavy cornice, and in the interstices were mouldings of stucco; chandeliers of gilded bronze, ornamented with rich Venetian glass, depending from the five centres. The floors were of dark and glossy oak, hid only at the sides by a narrow but rich carpeting. The chimney-pieces, which were massive, were of black but curiously veined marble, and the grates and andirons in the English fashion—open, and of polished steel, beautifully inlaid with brass.

From this room, there was access through folding-doors of admirable carving, to another of the same length, but less deeply windowed, which looked into a quadrangular courtyard. It was ornamented in a taste very similar, with the differences which the arrangements of a banqueting-room of course render necessary and proper. In this room, the spaces on the walls were occupied by the portraits of the family of Delancy. Upon the richly carved table which occupied the centre, was set out in the Venetian fashion, a cold collation; most of the vessels being of richly chased plate of different ages, a portion of the wreck of the fortunes of the Baron Delancy; and upon the dark and elaborately

carved massive board, which occupied one end of the room, stood in rich magnificence various goblets, candelabra, and chased dishes of gold and silver, bearing the crest or arms of the family.

Around the table were drawn seats crimson cushioned, and the floor was covered in the English fashion, with a strong matting, elastic and noiseless under the tread of the feet of many guests. Above the folding-doors in each room, was a small gallery with gilded rails, for the musicians, to which access was had by a concealed stair in the thick and massive walls of the building. The windows were furnished with the Venetian lattice, and a profusion of flowers in vases of the choicest porcelain, together with fruits and ices, helped to preserve that feeling of agreeable coolness, which, in these climates, is the one thing needful to pleasure. From an elegant anti-room, or small saloon, which communicated with those already described, was access to another similarly but less elaborately ornamented, in which were placed, not only boards with refreshments, but tables with materials for those games of chance or skill in which the luxurious magnificoes of Venice were wont to indulge, often to excess.

Two of these stately apartments were now filled, for the first time probably for a century, with a throng consisting of many of the chief nobles and fairest dames of Venice. The purpose was to celebrate not only the happy exploit just performed by the son of the Baron Delancy, but also the important services rendered to the Republic by the baron himself, in the war against the Turks still raging. At the head of the stately room first described sat the Baroness Delancy, together with her son the young Raymond; the Countess Luchesini, now generally believed to be his affianced bride; the powerful Marquis Spinelli, of whom report ran that he was one of the suitors of the beautiful and rich princess to whom Raymond had rendered so great a service; and a number of the female and male nobility and distinguished persons of the maritime city.

Various motives had, beyond a doubt, brought to this interesting festival the various characters who added im-

portance or splendour to the assemblage. Some came from a deep interest in the exploits of the father and son; who seemed to be, by their skill and valour, raising into importance a family driven into exile and oppressed by undeserved misfortune. Others were brought there by the wish to court the favour of the powerful and severe Cardinal di Santa Croce, who was now known to be a patron of the young soldier to whose courage and address his niece owed so much. Others again followed the lead of the powerful Marquis Spinelli; and others again, like the Senator Bembo and the effeminate Memmo, were induced by mere love of intrigue, or by envy, or impertinent curiosity.

Be their motives what they might, however, the gay and splendid throng seemed intent on amusement and enjoyment wherever to be found. The pause in the symphony which had temporarily interrupted the conversation of the Senator Bembo with Memmo and the really elegant and manly Chevalier Lanfranco, who were grouped together in one of the windowed recesses of the grand saloon, had only occurred to enable the Marquis Spinelli, together with the baroness, to lead off one of the figure dances fashionable at that period.

The noble lady of the absent Baron Delancy was naturally deeply gratified by the fortunate career of her husband and son. She had, as a consequence, greatly recovered both health and spirits; and excited, as she necessarily was, by her present position and her exertion to play the hostess, whose duty it was to preside over the splendid throng, a great proportion of her former beauty of feature and noble elegance of form were restored to her. Many were the admiring eyes which followed, as she moved, a lady of whose misfortunes they had heard, but of whose noble presence, in spite of misfortunes so heavy, they were not until now aware. Even the few who had previously been known to the baroness were astonished by the change, and it was difficult to say whether the noble and beautiful figure of the mother, or the manly and modest carriage of the handsome Raymond, her son, extorted most praises from their partial and gratified guests,

Taking advantage of the pause that occurred amongst those who patronised the dance, the group now renewed their interrupted conversation.

"By all the saints, without one exception," observed Memmo, in affected admiration, "I am astonished. If an archangel had told me that in the Baroness Delancy I should discover so splendid a woman, I should have hardly believed him. I thought her health had wholly sunk under the unmerited misfortunes of her family."

"Not so," responded the Senator Bembo gravely. "Undeserved persecution misses its victims; as we all know or ought to know. On the contrary, I have always found much to admire in the personal as well as mental qualities of the Baroness Delancy; but I must own at the same time," continued the senator, "that the recent change which I have witnessed in both is quite extraordinary."

"By St. Mark," minced Memmo, "I believe the mamma intends to outshine the daughter that is to be! Did you ever see so extraordinary a resemblance? I should have taken them almost for twin sisters had I not known the contrary."

"I never observed the resemblance nearly so strong as to-night," responded the senator dryly; "but dress does wonders sometimes, and in that respect they are both faultless, it must be owned."

"Similarity of lot, they say," observed the Chevalier Lanfranco, "produces similarity of expression, and even of countenance oftentimes. Both have, I believe, had early sorrow to encounter: at least so 'tis whispered." The Senator Bembo bit his lip as he carelessly tasted some fruit that stood beside him.

"Well!" interposed Memmo, with his usual affected half lisp, "all I can say is, that if I were the Grand Turk, and the two ladies were put to auction, I believe I should make a double purchase."

"Not upon the principle that variety is charming, it seems," responded Lanfranco.

"No!" exclaimed a voice from behind, which all re-

cognised as that of Signor Thomaso, "upon the principle of the ass betwixt two bundles of hay."

A loud and rapid burst of festive allegro drowned for a brief space the laugh which this sally elicited at the expense of the effeminate scion of nobility, Memmo. The talkers, however, were not to be balked of their diversion. Sipping some of the ices and other light refreshments which happened to be at hand, they waited till the movement was over, eager to fill up the interval with the wonted *divertimento* of sarcasm, raillery, satire, and scandal, as far as Venetian jealousy would allow of such entertainments. Memmo, as usual, led the van :

"Yon fortunate youth," indicating by a slight movement that the young Raymond Delancy was the person meant, "seems born to illustrate the rule of contrary. There are *mama mia*, and her daughter that is to be, beaming with pleasure like a double star, so like are they to-night to each other."

"As like as these two peaches," interposed Albertini; "whilst Fortunatus yonder, in spite of all his efforts to hide it, is absorbed in something that, judging by his countenance, no one would fancy to be very pleasurable."

"Why sure enough," remarked the Chevalier Lanfranco, "his smile, when he perpetrates one, seems rather of the artificial. Look now! What say you, Signor Thomaso? you who never want something to say!"

"What do I say?" replied the sarcastic personage addressed. "Just this, that he smiles as if he were paid for it, and had begun to repent of his bargain."

"And perhaps he *has* repented," interrupted the incorrigible Memmo. "I tell you there are no bounds either to the ambition or haughtiness of these islanders. In these qualities they may rival even the father of lies himself! And having rescued the niece of the Cardinal di Santa Croce," continued Memmo, lowering his voice, "who knows but he may deem the fair lady herself only sufficient salvage?"

"Hush!" interrupted Lanfranco, "you are on dangerous ground. 'Incedis per ignes, suppositos cineri doloso.' That

man must be mad, indeed," continued he in a suppressed tone, "who can imagine for one moment that the Cardinal di Santa Croce would suffer his niece to marry a foreigner, and that foreigner an Englishman."

"Why, the Admiral Baron Delancy is an Englishman, is he not?" asked Memmo.

"No doubt of it; but what then?" asked Lanfranco.

"See how he is trusted by the whole signory," answered Memmo.

"Their reason for confiding in him," gravely rejoined the chevalier, "is precisely that which induces them to distrust his countrymen; and no one," continued he in a low voice, "knows this better than the cardinal."

"Perhaps so," lisped Memmo, with a half laugh; "but I confess 'tis past my comprehending. I leave politics to the Council of Ten."

"And I get enough of them elsewhere," muttered the cautious Bembo, evidently not displeased by the tone of the conversation; "so adieu, signors, for the present at least."

"Is this jest or earnest, chevalier?" asked Thomaso, addressing Lanfranco, as the other strolled into another part of the apartment.

"Jest to the ear and eye, earnest to the understanding," replied the person addressed.

"Do you mean to puzzle me with an enigma?" rejoined Thomaso. "If so, say so."

"By no means," was the reply. "It is sufficiently plain at what all this points. This young adventurer, to whose glory we are here to add, has, it is thought by some, either lost something or forgotten something during this voyage of his, or perhaps both."

"I see," replied the other, in a marked tone. "Lost what it seems he still had to lose, and forgotten that which he ought to have remembered."

Lanfranco continued:—"If he should yield that which has ever been the vice of his country, a disproportionate ambition, and the acquisition of new conquests, he will soon,

in the estimation of one I need not name, be in the same category with the rest of them."

"That a zealous and faithful warrior of the faith," rejoined Thomaso, speaking very low, "should dislike the favourers of the pestilent heresies of Geneva and Wittemberg, and the accomplices of the cold-blooded Calvin and the ruffianly Knox, I can easily comprehend; but dislike is one thing, fear another. What has the Republic to dread from these dissatisfied islanders?"

"More than you think of," was the reply of Lanfranco. "His eminence, who is as astute a politician as he is a vigilant guardian of the Church, sees far before him, and can perceive, in the far horizon of things, looming dangers—as yet no bigger than a man's hand—of which those about us have not yet dreamed."

"Say you so?" returned his companion, with a gravity very unusual in him.

"I do," rejoined the chevalier. "'Tis now whispered—and the whisper is believed——"

"Speak low," interposed Thomaso, with a significant look; "that sinister-looking priest, whose business here I cannot very well understand, but who thrusts himself everywhere; who has for the last half-hour been watching the youth Delancy and his fair companion, is now I see watching us."

"He shall profit nothing by that," answered the other, suddenly turning round and fixing his eye on the Father Momoro; who, appearing to understand the look, glided away as if in search of some one.

"It is believed," resumed Lanfranco, "or at least 'tis whispered, and in high places too, that Vasco de Gama, so long given up, has returned to Portugal, and that he has found that sea-road to those Indies which Christopher Colon thought he had achieved when he stumbled upon his new world."

"These rumours, Lanfranco, are far from new," said Thomaso, with a look of utter incredulity.

"The rumours are not new," rejoined the other, "but their

confirmation is. Now mark, men now deem that Portugal may be the rival of the Republic; that the road is open to her. It may be so; but not for her is destined that eastern empire, believe me, signor."

"Indeed! for whom then say you is it destined?"

"For that restless, never-satisfied race who inhabit yon islands, wrapt in mists, once the world's 'Ultima Thulè,'" replied Lanfranco.

"For the English?" exclaimed Thomaso in astonishment.

"Yes; for these proud, reaching, and grasping islanders," continued the speaker. "Heretofore they have wasted their strength in attempts at conquest, which bravery might achieve but which no bravery could hold. Now they know their vocation. They have now learned the fatal secret, that 'the power of the seas is the abridgment of an empire,' and that empire is becoming theirs! Even now they dispute with Spain that 'new world' which Christopher Colon gave to Leon and Castille, to be reguerdoned with fetters and a prison-ship; and though De Gama may have been first to see that southern cross glittering near the further pole, of which the divine Dante prophesied so strangely, yon sea-kings, who heed nor cross nor crescent, but whose god is gold, will assuredly follow, and into the Thames instead of the Tagus will they turn the riches of the Indies."

Again the interlocutors were interrupted by the noisy strain of a Turkish march, which filled up some interval with its loud and stunning, but martial and stirring music; when Thomaso, turning round suddenly, and calling Lanfranco's attention by a gesture, exclaimed,—“After all, who can look upon yon splendid creature and not be fascinated?”

As the Chevalier Lanfranco turned round, he certainly felt that he had never yet seen the beautiful Countess Luchesini to such advantage. She was at that moment proceeding towards the folding-doors of the saloon attended by the young Raymond Delancy. The elasticity of her step gave additional grace to the always admirable *tournure* of her perfect figure. In fact, so light was her footstep that she scarcely seemed to touch the floor: the matchless airiness

of her gait rather reminded the spectator of the goddess Dian excited by the chase than of any mere mortal beauty; and when to this were added the fine expression of her countenance, the piercing vivacity of her glance, and the intellectual grace of her entire aspect, the charm was for the moment irresistible.

Nor was this to be wondered at. The peculiarity of the circumstances and occasion must naturally have contained excitement for the spirits of the fair countess. But there existed other reasons, less obvious in their nature, and not known to those present.

To the Countess Luchesini, singularly situated as she was with respect to the rulers of the Venetian state, the suspicious, jealous, bigoted, and unrelenting character of the Cardinal di Santa Croce had always been an object of deep though secret dread. This weight was now in a measure removed from her mind; and that unwonted buoyancy of spirits should follow a relief so great and unexpected, was only natural. The countess, in fact, felt that between herself and the cold, suspicious, prying eye of the political churchman, there now stood an advocate in the person of Raymond Delancy, whose advocacy even the cold cardinal would find it difficult to resist; and that the consciousness of this should give animation to her eyes, colour to her cheek, and sprightliness to her step, was only the natural result. Hence, when she passed, as she did at that moment, through the folding-doors of the saloon, hanging on the arm of the young and successful soldier, the buzz of admiration which followed was neither misplaced nor exaggerated.

She was unquestionably at the moment the finished picture of exquisite beauty fully matured, when the charms of a cultivated intellect and experience of the world are added to the more prominent fascinations of personal loveliness and perfection of form. Nor could it be denied that the power of her beauty on this occasion was somewhat heightened by the slight, but still obvious, though only occasional indications of absence of mind, and of suppressed constraint, which her young and handsome partner could not altogether conceal.

"Tell me, chevalier, who can look yonder and not be fascinated?" reiterated Signor Thomaso, as the couple passed through the folding-doors into the next saloon.

"None that I know of," answered Lanfranco: "not even perhaps some that ought," he added in a low tone; turning his eye as he spoke to a figure in deep shadow, who was gazing from a windowed recess in the same direction. It was that of the priest, who having again entered the apartment was gazing at the countess and her youthful companion, with eyes like those of an excited snake rather than of a confessor. Seeing himself observed he turned aside, and opening the lattice seemed to gaze out into the night, now far spent; and the two friends were proposing to seek some refreshment, when a servant came hastily through the folding-doors, and addressing the baroness, who was sitting at the head of the stately room, was quickly followed by her into the adjoining saloon; whilst another servant, closing the folding-doors, opened a second smaller door, which communicated with the corridor that afforded access to the entire suite.

This circumstance attracted, of course, very little attention; but when, after some time had elapsed, the baroness returned to her former station, not without some marks of uneasiness and agitation visible in her countenance, it became whispered about amongst the assembled guests, that the countess, probably owing to the heat and the exertions she had made during the evening, had become suddenly and somewhat seriously indisposed. This event, so unexpected, naturally threw a damp upon the gaiety and pleasure of the scene, in spite of every effort of the baroness, seconded by her son, to keep up the hilarity and enjoyment into which every one before had seemed to indulge. It was remarked that the exertions of the young soldier to entertain an assemblage who had been collected in a great measure to do honour to, and grace his good fortune, were unremitting; and some went so far as to say that the air of absence, sometimes visible during the earlier hours of that splendid evening, had almost vanished before its close. In no very long time, however, after the indisposition of the Countess Luchisini became generally

known, the company began to separate; and before the morning dawned, the splendid suite of rooms, opened for the occasion, were denuded of the illustrious guests of all ranks who had graced them with their presence.

The silence of the lofty and now deserted room was, however, broken by the echoes of one footstep. It was that of the young Raymond Delancy, who, restless and feverish, paced up and down the empty apartment, plunged in deep and somewhat bewildered thought. By the assemblage, of which she formed one of the chiefest ornaments, it was generally taken for granted that the sudden indisposition of the countess had arisen from over-exertion and the heat of a crowded ball-room; and at first this had been the very natural impression of the young man who witnessed it. There was, however, a singularity about the circumstances which after-reflection impressed strongly, though involuntarily, on the mind of Raymond Delancy, and which he could not forget. On leading the countess into the second saloon, he had seated her towards the head of the table; on which was set out a cold collation of every delicacy proper for the season and occasion. At this end of the apartment stood a richly carved sideboard, adorned with family plate and loaded with the choicest light wines of France and Italy, with iced drinks, liqueurs, and conserves of various kinds.

To this splendid display the attention of the countess was at first directed; and her young companion had courteously helped her to some of the delicacies with which it was accompanied; when, turning her eyes upwards accidentally, they were attracted by a full-length portrait, of which the execution would have been deemed admirable even in Venice, at that period the nurse of high art both in painting, sculpture, and architecture. It was the work of Zuccherò, and represented a young man of fine and most commanding features, in the English military habit of the period; and the colouring being powerfully shown by the brilliant lights which formed a portion of the ornaments of the sideboard, its effect as a painting, when seen near, was very powerful. At the first sight of it the beautiful countess visibly started, and, as it

were, recoiled ; but making a strong effort to appear at ease, though evidently labouring under some suppressed agitation, she asked her companion if it were a portrait, and of whom ?

“It is the portrait of my father, the Baron Delancy, taken when a young man, just ere his marriage,” answered Raymond ; when, to his surprise, the countess, having again glanced at the picture, turned suddenly very pale and appeared on the point of swooning away.

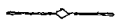
In reply to his agitated inquiries, however, she collected herself so far as to attribute her faintness to the heat of the apartments ; and having swallowed, at his solicitation, a small portion of wine, declared herself rather better, and begged Raymond not to alarm the baroness. This request the young man deemed it, however, best to evade ; and the baroness having been summoned to the spot, prevailed upon her friend, who was still evidently under great nervous agitation, to retire for the night, whilst she and her son returned to their guests.

Upon the mind of the young Raymond Delancy these circumstances had made an impression for which he could not, on reflection, altogether account. That the heat of a crowded saloon and over-exertion in dancing, to which, as she herself avowed, she had never been partial nor much accustomed, should produce indisposition, was only an ordinary occurrence. He could not, however, conceal from himself that the sudden agitation of the countess was connected in some way with the portrait of his father. He was well aware that she had never yet seen the Baron Delancy ; and he could only conclude that some accidental resemblance between his portrait and the features of some other person had been the cause of the sudden and irrepressible agitation evinced by his beautiful companion at the sight of it. But that the sight of the portrait of any one should so affect the accomplished countess was a marvel which the youth, whilst he could not explain, could not forget.

He determined, however, after long reflection, not to mention the circumstance even to the baroness, but to wait and see what explanation time might produce. In the mean-

while, his mind suffered a degree of bewilderment which he could neither understand nor throw off. He felt as if some strange involvements were connected with his destiny, which he could neither see nor evade. Thrown by the misfortunes of his house in the midst of strangers, young, inexperienced, and diffident of himself, he had all at once become involved in events singular in themselves, and possibly productive of consequences still more singular.

Thus beset by conflicting reflections and emotions opposed to each other, he became only more perplexed. Like most men whose characters are manly, brave, and decided when their course is plain, he wanted determination and self-confidence when events became entangled and complicated; and struggled amid the meshes of a fate at once strange, complex, and mysterious. Nor was he a little relieved when, wearied by useless and contending thoughts, he beheld through the open lattice a faint eastern streak, the harbinger of day, and felt upon his feverish cheek and brow the first cool breeze of the morning.



CHAPTER XVI.

THE TORNADO.

THE report made next morning by the physician of the countess was unfavourable. He described his patient as labouring under extreme nervous depression, and exhibiting some symptoms of an impending attack of low fever. He accordingly recommended her instantly being removed to the Luchesini Palace, and secluded from every possible cause of excitement, until the probable direction of the malady should be more certainly ascertained.

This was of course done without loss of time; but its lapse did not bring about any alleviation of the indisposition of the fair invalid. On the contrary, after a few days had elapsed, during which her nervous irritability and depression

were distressingly great, a low nervous fever set in, attended with a severe prostration both of bodily strength and spirits. During the first few days of this serious attack the baroness was admitted twice or thrice to the bed-chamber of her suffering friend; after a short time even these visits, however, were interdicted by the physicians. They insisted upon the sufferer being entirely secluded from all excepting her necessary attendants, and at last declared that a removal to the mainland, and a more bracing atmosphere, were absolutely necessary, to ensure her recovery from the state of prostration, bodily and mental, to which this attack, at a period of the year so unfavourable to such complaints, had reduced her. This was accordingly carried into execution; the amiable and anxious Baroness Delancy being alone permitted to take leave, in a short interview with the fair invalid, whose debility was very great.

It may be easily supposed that an event like this could hardly occur without giving rise to those vague whispers and insidious rumours which usually follow such circumstances. The younger Delancy had been viewed by most of his friends and associates as the favoured suitor of the rich, handsome, and accomplished Countess Luchesini. Such alliances were common at the period, in Italy as well as elsewhere. They were quite in accordance with the morality as well as manners of the age. The Young Raymond was easily supposed to have made light of some disparity of years, for the sake of the wealth, station, and influence such a connection would bestow upon an otherwise friendless exile; and no one thought either of disputing his right so to act, or disparaging his prudence in so acting.

To such persons a sudden stop to arrangements, generally held to be concluded, was sure to afford food for comment and explanatory surmise. By some it was said that the Senator Bembo, whose attentions to the wealthy countess were notorious, and whose whole time was divided between intrigues, either of a selfish or else licentious cast, had contrived to bring about a disruption of the arrangements. By others it was asserted that jealousy of some younger rival,

on the part of the countess herself, had caused distrust and ultimate coldness to occur. By a third party it was surmised that the young man himself had wavered, and suffered ambition or caprice to interfere with good faith; and that a too late repentance had reversed a too hasty decision. To this conclusion the demeanour of the young Englishman had certainly afforded some countenance.

That his mind had been by events drawn aside from his too precipitate engagements with the fascinating countess, was true; and his casual absence and abstraction of mind, in some measure, proved it. But Raymond himself could not help feeling that with the illness of the countess something of mystery was connected; and that, in some inexplicable way, it was in part at least caused by the unexpected view of the portrait of his father. By what strange possibility this could be, he could not even in imagination conceive; but neither could he reason away the evidence of his own senses which assured him of the fact. His mind, irritated by this conflict of feelings, which he could not fathom and could not shake off, and by the questionable position in which he now stood in the eyes of many, gradually became more abstracted and thoughtful, not to say melancholy.

When not occupied by the duties of his command, which still required, though his squadron was now laid up in harbour, a portion of his care, he again indulged in solitary aquatic trips out into the Adriatic; sometimes alone, sometimes in a light skiff with a single boatman. This sort of solitude was pleasing to him, because he suddenly felt his course of life, as it were, thrown into abeyance, and himself apparently driving this way and that amidst conflicting currents, the real direction of which was hidden from him. It was impossible that any youth of his age and pretensions, thrown by so strange a combination of circumstances into contact with a female, noble and accomplished as was the Princess di Santa Croce, should not feel bewildered and flattered by the degree of interest in her preserver which she evidently felt and scarcely concealed.

Yet to what was this to lead? In rank, in possessions, in

high connections, and influence, she was too far removed for the aspirations, if he had dared to entertain them, of an exile like himself, broken in misfortunes though gentle in descent. In his breast also the princess, however fascinating and however admirable she might be, both in personal grace and intellectual endowment, had really never awakened the passion of love. He was bewildered, charmed, and flattered, by the preference for his conversation, which she did not care to hide, and by the deep and even tender feelings of gratitude for his services which she evinced; but his emotions went no further, and amounted rather to an admiring friendship than any warmer passion. It might indeed have ripened into another feeling had opportunity been afforded; but it was not so.

The princess had, soon after her arrival at Venice, attended her aged uncle, the cardinal, to Rome; where he always passed some portion of the winter, and where his accomplished and high-born niece was one of the ornaments of society. Even to see her again speedily, Raymond could not therefore hope; and though her form was often present to his imagination and her voice to his ear, the remembrance was pleasurable rather than passionate: a grateful recollection usurped the place of more devoted feelings. In fact, it was in a great measure unknown to himself how far his deeper affections had really been pre-occupied.

When, seated in his skiff, he beheld in the distance the dark mass of buildings which formed the pile of the ancient Carthusian convent, he was himself hardly aware of the deep interest with which he contemplated the spot where he had by accident the first glimpse of the beautiful but unknown girl who so strangely disappeared from his view, and whom he afterwards rescued on the quay of that lonely canal from the clutch of ruffianly violence only again to lose her. In spite of himself he was, on such occasions, perpetually recurring to these recollections, and torturing himself with vain guesses at circumstances too singular and mysterious to be cleared up by any plausible effort of the invention. One thing alone, amidst the strange events in which he had borne

a part, was certain; and this was that the author, whoever that might be, of the warning which he received as to the designs of the corsair, could not have given it without exact knowledge; and where such knowledge, perilous as it was, could be obtained, or by whom possessed, within the jurisdiction of the jealous government of Venice, were questions he almost trembled to put, even to himself!

However his vanity might wish to connect the singular fortune which had befallen him with the interesting being with whom his only interview had been at once so fateful and so brief, an undefined sense of alarm never failed to step in and check the thought. The service done him seemed to involve too much both of the perilous and questionable to allow him to wish it, in cold blood, to have been done at such a risk as these circumstances seemed to imply. The similarity of the device of the seal and that of the ring could not, however, be argued away by any finesse of mental logic; and the connection of both, in some way, with the whereabouts of the fair *mystérieuse* continued to haunt him, like one of those cloudcast shadows which, whilst we cannot help observing, we cannot define.

It was in this dreamy, uncertain, and perplexed state of mind that Raymond Delaney, attended by a single boatman, in a light skiff, slowly proceeded out, leaving Venice in the distance, into the Adriatic. It was about noon-day, and the weather, considering the advanced season, appeared to an ordinary observer singularly favourable for the enjoyment of the sea breeze. For some days, cold and shifting gusts of wind, with frequent rain showers, had ruffled the face of the waters. This uncertain and changeful state of the atmosphere had suddenly altered, and a remarkable calm had succeeded, accompanied by a temperature sultry for the time of year, and singularly heavy and oppressive. A bright sun, interrupted only by a somewhat unusual haze on the horizon, brightened the surface of the scarcely moving sea, and the stillness of the expanse was hardly interrupted by a few occasional sea-birds. As the distant towers and masts of the city became dim in the distance, the young man reclined in

his skiff, gave himself up to revolving thoughts, and had almost forgotten the approach towards the hour of sunset, when a light and sudden breeze momentarily coming against his cheek, and the voice of his companion, aroused him from his reverie. Looking up, he found the boatman motioning silence with one hand and pointing with the other to the distant horizon.

"Hush! There! did you hear it, signor?" eagerly asked the boatman.

"Hear what, Jacopo?" was the reply.

"A storm, growling to the south-west yonder, signor," pointing, as he spoke, to a dark hazy-looking mass close above the horizon, near which appeared to be piled, just upon the sea, some smallish clouds like woolpacks, the edges of which were faintly tinged with sunlight.

As Raymond, with a seaman's eye, examined the mass of clouds to which Jacopo had called his attention, a bright vivid lightning suddenly shot across and illumed the dark mass; and after several seconds the dull reverberations of a distant crash of thunder again rumbled over the blue face of the Adriatic.

"By San Marco! but it's time to think of putting about, signor," said the boatman hurriedly, as the hollow echoes rolled away to silence. "There's mischief yonder, or my name's not Jacopo!" and as he spoke, a gust of air that seemed to flit over the waters, ruffling them as it went, lifted the sail that hung over the boat's side.

Raymond, young as he was, had seen enough to lead him to suspect that this was only the first light breath of the hurricane that was to come.

"Put about, and up sail, Jacopo!" was his reply; "we shall have breeze enough anon." And with his assistance the canvas was once more spread to catch the variable gusts of wind that experience taught him were likely to precede the storm, evidently travelling in the far distance. In this anticipation he was not deceived; but the help thus obtained was not according to his hope. As the sky became more and more overcast, an occasional vivid gleam of lightning

glanced upon the crests of the waves which rose rapidly more and more high, and a short rattle of thunder, loud and distinct, showed the accelerated pace at which the tempest was overshadowing the rolling Adriatic. But the gusts, which either preceded or followed the peals, veered so violently and were so sudden and vehement, that it became difficult to show canvas without a constant risk of over-setting the frail skiff on which their lives depended, and a steady course was out of the question.

In truth, the situation of the young Englishman and his companion was fast becoming extremely perilous. Sunset was now close at hand, and the city and port of Venice were still far distant. A dull, sullen, red streak in the western horizon was all that remained of day, and only served to convince them that darkness must speedily be upon them. They were without a compass; or a light, if they had possessed one. The atmosphere, which had all day been hazy, was now becoming so loaded with moisture as the night became colder, that it was doubtful if the lights of the city would remain visible; and deprived of this guide, it was evident that, in such a night as now impended, their position would be very critical.

To make the most of the short time they yet had left, the boatman Jacopo worked at the oars, whilst Raymond, keeping such part of the sheet as he dared to hoist exposed to the gale, which increased minutely in violence and unsteadiness, held it so as to be ready to let loose should the gust require it, whilst with the other hand he steered the skiff with a coolness and skill that might have become a more seasoned seaman. In this way, guided only by an occasional glimmer from the lights of the distant city, and steering nearly by guess, they perceived the gale to abate for a few minutes, and hope, which had nearly fled, once more took possession of their breasts.

"Twenty minutes more of this, signor, and we shall get the shelter of the lagunes," said Jacopo, resting on his oars for a single moment, and gazing through the night a-head as in search for some light or sound.

Hardly, however, were the words uttered, when a flash of lightning, so vivid that both were for the moment dazzled, revealed in all their terrible workings the now boiling waters of the Adriatic. A loud burst of thunder followed, with hardly an interval between, and this was succeeded by a hissing noise, which even the loud whistle of the wind, as it rose and fell, could not hide. It was the hurtle of the hurricane, now in full career upon the face of the waters, whose waves it almost beat down. In an instant the ill-fated skiff, with its doomed freight, was wrapt in utter darkness, whilst the hail and spin-drift, which seemed about to fill the struggling boat, so blinded the unfortunate Raymond and his companion, that farther exertion of any kind seemed all but impossible.

Nor was their fate long in suspense. Jacopo the boatman, feeling the peril immediate, had jumped upon his feet to make a vain endeavour to furl the half-hoisted sail. The skiff left to herself broached to, and in an instant the gale, veering several points, and bringing with it a tremendous sheet of drift mixed with hailstones and rain, upset her, pitching the luckless Jacopo entirely overboard, who, unable either to cry out or struggle amid a tempest so overwhelming, sunk silently and blindly in the darkness. During the few terrible moments that next ensued, Raymond Delancy had no other feeling than that of despair of life, and a sense of the terrible struggle that they must undergo, who suddenly, in the full flush of health and strength, are to meet their death by drowning. In such a crisis, however, a strong instinct supplies the place of recollection and reason. Luckily the cord, attached as a tackle to the corner of the sheet, had become entangled with Raymond's wrist, and with the strong clutch of a drowning man he grasped it. It stood firm, and the sheet being entangled with the boat, which now floated nearly keel up, he was by holding on enabled to keep his head at intervals above the waves, and at length grasp the keel, which, owing to the angle at which the skiff floated in consequence of the submerged mast and its tackle, afforded him a tolerably stable support. This, however, in such a night was only a respite from fate.

Every succeeding minute saw the sea make clear way over his head, and the violence of the downpour of rain, mixed with hard hailstones, so impeded respiration during the intervals afforded for it, that the young man soon felt his strength and power of holding on rapidly diminishing, and concluded that he must soon again undergo the doom from which accident had reprieved him, for a brief and painful but ultimately vain struggle. His senses began to waver—he continued to cling to the keel of his wrecked skiff mainly by the wonderful force of conscious instinct, and in another half-hour probably all would have been over with Raymond Delancy, when he was suddenly recalled to a sense of half-recollection by a gleam of light which, flashing upon his closing eye through the rain and darkness, spoke, however faintly, of assistance. It was little more than momentary. He lost it again. One—two—vivid streams of brightness followed, lighting up the sea that now scathed and boiled round him in the most extraordinary manner. Consciousness was again all but extinct, when it was again recalled by the sound of more than one human voice.

The persons who uttered them seemed close at hand, and as far as the pauses of the storm allowed them to reach the ear of the sinking youth, one seemed to be that of a female, who was imploringly insisting on something that another opposed. To perceive this was the last conscious effort of the young Englishman. He attempted to call, but in vain, and again sinking into a state of insensibility, his last feeling was that of being grasped by the collar by a strong hand, but whether by friend or enemy he knew not.

On the recovery of his senses by the young soldier, he found himself extended on a low sofa. An old man was applying to his nostrils a sponge dipped in some liquid of a stimulating and pungent quality, whilst a younger man, more singularly attired, was bathing his temples with what appeared to be water strongly perfumed. As he gradually regained his recollection of what had passed, he became aware that his wet garments had been taken off and other garments supplied him, for the time, of a silken texture, and more like

those in use in the East than after the fashion of any European country.

As soon as he exhibited symptoms of returning recollection, the elder of his two attendants made a sign, on perceiving which the other, who appeared to be younger and taller, retired with a profound obeisance, but without uttering a word. The elder, who now alone remained by him, appeared to be a man far advanced in years. His hair was nearly or totally white, and the top of his head was entirely bald, but in such a way that it was impossible to say whether it was in consequence of his bearing the priestly tonsure, or from that partial baldness which denudes the crown of the head, whilst it leaves scattered locks both at the back and towards the temples. His beard, like his hair, was white. His complexion was not embrowned, but rather of that sallow cast which is common in Persia and the countries adjacent. There was, however, a spot of hectic-looking red on each cheek, which assimilated singularly with a glassy brilliance of eye not unlike that which is produced frequently by the excitement of opium, or by the use of a pigment for the eyelids applied to their under edge, as is practised in India and other parts of the East. He was dressed in a white garment, not unlike that of some of the monastic orders, with a hood thrown back, which garment descended as low as his feet, and was confined round the waist by a girdle fastened with a buckle, in which very unmonastically sparkled some gems, real or apparent, like rubies or the rose-tinted topaz found in Thibet. On his feet were sandals of the same colour as his garment.

The room in which the young Raymond now found himself, was as singular as the attendants who administered restoratives. It was nearly square, with a curved or groined roof, made of some dark and carved wood, from the centre of which hung an antique candelabrum, by means of which, aided with a number of additional lights, it could only be dimly illuminated, such was its height. At one end of the apartment stood the low but capacious sofa, carved after the Asiatic fashion, on which reclined the young soldier. The

rest of the apartment was surrounded by what in Eastern climes is called a divan, which ran along the walls.

At the opposite extremity of the room, fronting the sofa, there appeared to be an alcove or recess, before which was drawn a rich curtain in magnificent folds, and at one side a similar recess similarly curtained might be observed. The divan as well as the floor was covered with rich Persian carpets, and on the side opposite the second recess were narrow windows, evidently of an antique style of architecture, through the deeply stained glass of which, giving out hues rich and pure, but still sombre and gloomy, the radiant beams of the struggling moon could scarcely make their way. From the great thickness of the wall, and the shadows of the drapery which curtained each opening, even the light of the mid-day sun must here have been of little avail to illuminate; and as a matter of course, the faint glimmer of the moon's ray, scarcely perceptible amid the gloom, was not noticed by and hardly visible to the observer.

The first act of the old man on perceiving the youth raise himself upon one elbow, was to whisper to him, in good Italian, but with a foreign accentuation, that he was safe, and to caution him not to attempt too hastily to speak, nor to give way to any shadow of alarm, for which there was no need. At the same time he offered to him a goblet containing some cordial, which Raymond eagerly partook of, and found to be wine richly spiced. In a few minutes its influence was manifested. The young man was enabled to recall his scattered recollections, and to make an effort to address his preserver.

"The first duty of restored life," he said, though with much difficulty, "is to thank him who, under God, is its preserver."

"Young man," was the reply of the stranger, "not so. Whether for good or for evil, in the spirit of light or of darkness, we are but instruments. TO THE ONE, then, sole and indivisible, whose instruments we are, be gratitude rendered, for there alone it is due."

"In thanking the bearer of a precious gift," replied Raymond, "we thank the all-bountiful Giver."

The old man paused for a moment, looking at him somewhat intently, and then continued:—

“Young man,” he said, with a solemn emphasis, “your thanks to me—if thanks I must have—are to be paid in deeds and not in words. If I have saved your life, it has been at the risk—the deep risk of my own, and of more than mine.”

“If risk can pay for risk—or danger be the reguerdon of danger—the debt of gratitude shall be discharged to the uttermost,” answered Raymond.

“You answer well, young signor,” rejoined the old man, again turning a searching glance towards the face of the speaker; “you answer well. Let the event also be answerable.”

The old man again paused, and then rose from his seat.

“You have now, son,” he resumed, “been snatched, with whatever difficulty and with whatever risk to others, from that dark valley at whose end is death. I shall for the present leave you; but you now both need and are able to partake of refreshment, and it shall be sent you. To the conditions which I impose, however, you must subscribe. You must neither attempt to address any one who may enter this room, nor must you on any consideration attempt to leave it. That you will rigidly keep these stipulations you must pledge your honour.”

“To these and to any other behest of yours, lawful in itself, I pawn my honour for my obedience,” rejoined the young man, reverentially bowing his head and laying his hand upon his breast. His companion gracefully returned the salutation and left the room, and in a few minutes the promised refreshments were brought in and placed upon the table. The bringer was tall and of a dark complexion; but by the dim light of the lamps that faintly illumined the apartment, his features were not distinctly discernible. Taking dress and complexion together, he appeared to be of Moorish origin; and after the solemn manner of his nation, on all occasions of a ceremonial character, having placed wine and various eatables upon a small antique table, he

made to the young Raymond a profound obeisance and noiselessly withdrew.

Left to himself the reflections of the young Raymond Delancy were both bewildering and perplexing. By what means he had been rescued from a death so close at hand, he had no recollection; nor could he, on reflection, satisfy himself as to the length of time he had spent in the asylum to which he had been so strangely brought. From the state of exhaustion in which he still felt himself to be, he was convinced that his restoration to life and consciousness must have been a work of time; and that, between insensibility and sleep, many hours must have been passed uncounted by him. He concluded, therefore, that the second night had now arrived, and that he must, at least, have been nearly twenty-four hours in the mysterious sanctuary in which he now found himself. These uncertainties were, however, soon to be dispelled.

After a short time had elapsed, the old man again entered the apartment, followed by the Morisco attendant.

"You will excuse my apparent obtrusiveness, young signor," mildly said the old man; "but time presses. Your sea-steeped garments are now in a condition again to be of use, and I restore them to you. In an hour it will be time for you to depart; and safety requires that no time should be lost." As he said these words, the old man turned away, and walking with a slow step to the side of the saloon, partially withdrew the drapery that curtained the recess. Within the alcove thus partly disclosed, appeared an altar, apparently of white marble, upon which suddenly uprose a small silvery flame, which with a mild light illumined all around it. Before the altar the old man knelt down, as in silent prayer; whilst a fragrance as from incense faintly pervaded the whole apartment. At this singular apparition the young soldier was for a moment startled. Recollecting himself, however, and curbing the curiosity naturally excited by a scene so peculiar, to divest himself of his loose garments and reclothe himself in his former habiliments was not the work of very many minutes; at the expiration of which the

old man arose, and again advancing to the sofa, now occupied by Raymond, seated himself at the other extremity, and looking benevolently at the youth seated not far from him, thus addressed him :—

“Our minutes, young man, are now precious ; and as some exertion is now to be made, let me, as your leech, recommend some further refreshment.”

As he said this, he pointed to an elegant vessel of fine Venetian glass, in which was a liquor of the colour of a rich white wine, resembling the sherbet which is such a favourite in the East, and so famed for removing that sense of exhaustion and intolerable lassitude consequent on the heats of tropical climates.

Raymond complied with his companion’s counsel, and drank of the cool and grateful beverage ; when the old man, fixing his eyes on the table upon which lay some articles belonging to his involuntary guest, said in a quiet but marked manner,—

“Pardon me, young signor, for the request ; but before we part, never again to meet, I would fain crave an answer to two questions.”

“Name them,” rejoined Delancy ; “and if in my power to answer, they shall be replied to.”

“First, I would fain know, then,” continued the old man, “where, and how you came by this ring?” taking up that which lay upon the table.

The young man almost started at the question, for a ray of light seemed to flash upon his mind as soon as it was uttered. He however replied, with assumed calmness, “It was given me by a young female whom I had the good fortune to save from ruffian violence.”

The old man visibly altered a little in colour.

“A love-gift then, I presume, young signor?”

“Not so, sir,” replied Delancy, with a melancholy smile. “A gift rather of fruitless and vain remembrance, for I know not, and, I fear, never may know the giver.”

The old man was visibly relieved. “And this portrait,” said he, smiling faintly as he spoke ; “’tis a beautiful face. The features are exquisite !”

"'Twas obtained at the same time as its companion," merely answered Delancy, unwilling to explain farther. "It was probably dropped by one of the ruffian ravishers."

"Indeed!" said the old man, musing, as if a sudden thought had struck him.

"Such was my conclusion," rejoined Raymond Delancy.

"And is that all the interest you have in it?" inquired the old man, mildly.

"All!" rejoined Raymond, with something perhaps of bitterness but more of sadness.

"Then," said his aged companion eagerly, "let me beg of you a boon. In return for a life preserved, allow me to retain this portrait."

To say the young man was not startled and astonished by this request, would be false, as his manner betrayed. In a moment he recovered himself, however.

"It is yours," he quietly answered, "if a matter so trifling may be called a boon."

"The most precious gift is that which is most deeply prized," said the old man in a low tone, and then rose up. "The hour of departure is now come," he continued; "but before you depart, I must, for my own safety, require from you one solemn pledge."

"Name it," replied Delancy, rising from the couch on which he was sitting.

The old man took his hand, and leading him to the marble altar, from which a silvery tongue of flame still rose, took from his breast a roll of what seemed to be vellum, on which were written in close manuscript, lines of various characters.

"Swear," said the old man, solemnly, "never to reveal aught you have seen or heard in this place where you now are!"

In spite of himself, a sudden and indescribable dread of he knew not what, seized Raymond Delancy, on this appeal.

"I am not used to swear—at least on such an altar," he answered, making a strong effort to regain self-possession and composure of manner.

"The altar, young signor," rejoined his companion, with a

smile so severe, that it almost ceased to be a smile, "is dedicated to the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and all-merciful God;" and here he made a reverential gesture. "An oath, sworn before such an altar, methinks, cannot but be holy."

The old man paused for a few moments, and then continued: "You do not, however, swear upon this altar. Here are those Scriptures which all Christian men believe to be holy. Swear, young man, upon them."

"I know not these characters," responded Raymond, shrinking back instinctively, and startled not a little by the strangeness of his situation.

The old man again smiled that severe smile, which almost bordered upon a sneer.

"These characters, young signor, are Hebraic. This is your first gospel, known as that of Matthew, originally written in Hebrew, although that version is erroneously held to be lost. The others are Greek. These rolls are the Syrian pentateuch, which of the Hebraic sacred writings are alone received by the Eastern Jews. Upon these, surely, thou mayst safely swear."

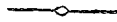
"I swear it!" said Raymond, with deep reverence, and now reassured. "I swear never to reveal what I have seen and heard in this place, whatever and wherever it be!"

"Keep thou thine oath, as thou hopest for eternal life," said the old man, with a deep solemnity: "and now one word more and fare-thee-well! as in darkness thou camest hither, so in darkness must thou go hence. Be not alarmed, young man. You are armed," and here the old man glanced at a weapon richly ornamented, between a poniard and a conteau de chasse, then fashionable amongst the younger Venetian magnates, "and you have only one unarmed attendant. You therefore have nothing to fear. But this sash you must not remove from your eyes until that attendant shall permit you to do so; this you must promise on your honour; your preserver's safety demands it."

"I fear not," responded the young Raymond. "What should I fear? My life has already been in your hands.

Why should you save it to-day, to take it to-morrow? Farewell! I shall observe my pledge."

As Raymond said this, he took from the old man the silken sash and began to pass it over his eyes. At this moment he was aware of a heaviness of respiration. A sudden faintness succeeded. His legs seemed to fail him; and his last recollection was that he turned instinctively, and clasped the old man's neck to prevent himself, as he believed, from falling upon the floor.



CHAPTER XVII.

FATAL CURIOSITY.

FROM this state of semi-insensibility the young soldier was first roused by feeling a shower of cold water drops fall upon his face. Thus startled from a sort of dreamy state of unconsciousness, he grasped instinctively, like one aroused from deep sleep or a fainting-fit, and felt himself clutch the small branch of a tree or bush. It broke in his hand; but still only half awake to the whole realities of his situation, he retained it with a convulsive clutch, which slowly returning recollection did not unlock. In a few minutes the motion of the boat in which he now was taught him to be aware that he was once more upon the bosom of the Adriatic, still rolling and heaving from the effects of the recent hurricane. The cool sea breeze blew freshly against his face, and he felt that the skiff, in which he was sitting half-reclined at the stern, was urged over the swelling waters with a vigorous hand. Still, however, he was collected enough not to remove the silken sash that impeded his vision, until at last it was gently untied by the hand of his attendant, and the lights of the maritime city in the distance proved to him that he was now safe, and that his mysterious preserver had kept faith with him. Another hour brought him to the verge of the lagunes; and his conductor, making apparently

for the most unfrequented landing-place, made signs to Raymond that this must be the completion of his voyage. No words passed between them ; and refusing, with a respectful obeisance, some gold which the young man would have pressed upon him, he pushed his skiff into the waters and was quickly lost amid the night.

Left thus strangely, by night, upon one of the most ancient and least frequented islets of the sea-girt city, Raymond Delancy stood for some time rooted to the spot, buried in profound musing. His attention was first drawn to the broken branch which he still held grasped, instinctively as it were, in his hand. It suddenly occurred to him that this trifling incident, inconsequential as it appeared, might yet enable him to identify the spot whence he had been brought. It was a short but somewhat thick branch of one of those dwarfed shrubs that, in that climate, flourish at the very brink of the sea, and brave the occasional incursions of the salt wave. Being of a brittle wood, it had been torn off in a manner rather singular ; and the tree or bush, of which it had been a small limb, was readily capable of identification.

To achieve this adventure he was not unnaturally inclined. To do so was no breach of the oath which he had been made to take. He wished to reveal nothing of what had befallen him, and was resolved not to do so ; but what was to prevent him, if it were in his power, from knowing more of the inmates of the mysterious seclusion in which he had so strangely found safety and shelter ? It was, putting all the circumstances together, impossible for him not to fancy that one of the inmates of that strangely secluded retreat must be the beautiful and interesting girl whom he had been fortunate enough to rescue from violence. When on the point of perishing, one of the voices, of which he heard the imploring tones, was that of a female. The old man's anxiety to possess the miniature portrait, which he had regained in a way so extraordinary, proved the deep interest he took in the transaction. Could the beautiful girl be his daughter ? and had her father saved his life at her entreaty ? Again it struck him that the male attendant or mute who

had landed him was similar in stature and air to him who attended the beautiful incognita on the night of the rescue; and he was almost persuaded that the place where he then stood was a continuation of the lonely quay where that daring deed had been attempted.

The morning, which was now about to dawn, confirmed this suspicion, and the circumstance afforded an additional though slight proof that this lonely spot was in some way connected with the mysterious retreat, and that the young beauty, whose image he had from that hour never forgotten, was also connected with it. Why this profound secrecy was observed, was, of course, a puzzling consideration, and one into which he perhaps had no right further to inquire; but he felt himself irresistibly urged to obtain, if possible, some further knowledge of the fair and fascinating and sylph-like creature to whom he had rendered so great a service; and he was further impelled by the conviction, that if this opportunity were lost, he would never have another. Filled with these reflections, he bent his way homewards through the gay streets and peopled canals of Venice in the bright sunrise of the morning, and easily framed a tale to account for his absence and allay the natural alarm it had created in his own household.

The second night after this adventure beheld Raymond Delancy alone in a light skiff, stealing out by the light of a rising and crescent moon, from amongst the Venetian lagunes, and making his way towards the ancient Carthusian convent, the dark massive pile of which loomed grimly and solemnly in the distance. He had been employed during the day at the arsenal and harbour, inspecting the repairs of his galleys, which had been somewhat damaged in the conflict of the Spezzian Gulf; and feigning a desire to enjoy the sea air of the evening, he pushed out, as was not seldom his custom, alone in a light skiff into the Adriatic, now perfectly calm, and reflecting, mirror-like, the faint silvery glimmer of the rising moon. The strong impression upon his mind was, that the mystic retreat, in which for a few hours he had been sheltered and revived, was in some way

connected with the vast pile of building near which he had first caught a glimpse of the fascinating creature whom he afterwards rescued. It was his belief that the place where he himself had so nearly perished, together with the unfortunate Jacopo, was near this solitary pile of building; and from it he fancied the ray of light proceeded which met his vision just as he was about to sink. He resolved, therefore, to steal with his skiff under the shadow of that ancient pile, about which he was aware so many superstitious legends still clung to the minds of the lower classes of Venetian citizens, and by the dim light of the growing moon discover, if he could, some clue to the retreat in which he had found shelter and safety. His first night's search, and that of the second, like the first, was in vain.

The rugged walls of the old convent, worn by the elements, rose, for the most part, within three or four feet of the brink of the islet on which they were built. The small space between the wall and the wave was thickly clad with such stunted trees, smaller shrubs, and pendulous plants, as in this latitude dare the close proximity of the sea, and almost dip themselves in its wave. Amidst this generally closely interwoven foliage, the gray rock, the basement of the islet, sometimes peeped out; but the bank, for the most part, exhibited only a mass of interlaced branches and such flowering grasses and plants as flourish in the brinish breath of the Adriatic. For many hours the young Raymond slowly and silently examined every slight nook and bend of this thicket, but in vain.

At length he discovered, not far from an angle of the huge pile of building, an aperture amongst the brushwood which seemed as if it might possibly lead to some hidden entrance under the adjacent masonry; but the moonlight having now deserted him, he was compelled to postpone until the night ensuing all further investigation. In the course of the following night, however, having taken with him a small torch and the means of striking a light, he ventured to push his skiff into the opening, which clearly led under the foundations of the building, and after a minute search discovered,

to his surprise and joy, the counterpart of the broken branch which he had carefully preserved.

Raymond Delancy, after his first surprise began to subside, reflected for some time before he ventured to proceed farther. He had sworn solemnly never to reveal his knowledge of the retreat in which he had found life, hospitality, and shelter. Might not his present conduct indirectly tend to reveal it? Was he not, by this intrusion, violating the hospitality to which he owed so much? On the other hand, he argued that he had never pledged himself not to find if possible the fascinating being upon whom his happiness now seemed to hang, and to whose well-being he possibly might be necessary. With the intelligence which enabled him to baffle the cruel scheme of the Turkish corsair against the accomplished Princess di Santa Croce he could not but think that she was in some way connected. This proved the deep interest in his fortunes felt by her, whoever she was. He was conscious, too, that in seeking again to see her his intentions were pure, and that he did not dream of violating his pledge. Why then should he not proceed?

After spending some time in these reflections, love and curiosity, for by both was he at once assailed, obtained the mastery of his actions, and carefully depositing his torch in a place made for it towards the head of his skiff, he proceeded, never doubting he should soon reach some adit to the pile of building above. He soon found that he was within a passage of variable depth walled and arched. He could only proceed by pushing forward his boat by means of an oar; and so low was the passage, that he could not, at times, stand sufficiently upright to do this with effect.

Not doubting that he must soon reach the termination of this narrow and inconvenient access, he thoughtlessly and without consideration urged his light vehicle onwards; when, resting for a moment and looking round him, he found to his surprise and with some alarm, that the narrow path he was threading branched in more ways than one, and that he must have considerably changed his direction without being aware of it. This was a circumstance embarrassing and

unpleasant, to say the least of it ; nor was that embarrassment nor that feeling of uneasiness decreased, when, on attempting to return, he suddenly and most unexpectedly found himself beset by the same difficulty. In short, after a few attempts to retrace his way, he became, to his deep consternation, fully aware that he was involved in a sort of labyrinth of narrow passages filled with water, which probably ran amidst the entire foundations of this immense and ancient pile of masonry ; though for what purposes it was not easy to conceive. In some places, on sounding with his oar, he found the depth considerable. In others, two or three feet of water only were to be found. For what purpose was this strange subterranean maze constructed ? For concealment merely of the secret entrance from the Adriatic ? Or were these mysterious depths the watery graves of prisoners in these gloomy cells, whose bodies were thrown there to rot in darkness, or to be consumed by the fish and reptiles of the mud of the lagunes ?

Be these questions answered as they might, in no long time the young Raymond Delancy found his situation to be such as he shuddered to think of. The maze of watery windings in which he had unthinkingly and rashly involved himself, seemed made to bewilder all who might venture into it and cut off all chance of escape. Extrication seemed impossible. Sometimes the way ended in a low arch level almost with the water. Sometimes it suddenly changed its direction, and, winding round, brought the wanderer who followed it to the place whence he had set out. Sometimes all roads seemed closed up. Sometimes three or four were open at once. In short, such were its intricacies, and so deep the gloom of the dark monotonous walls and dark waters between, that for him who should once involve himself in its extraordinary windings all evasion or escape seemed cut off, unless furnished with some clue to the secrets of the place. To add to the terror of Raymond Delancy he now found that his torch was about to expire.

To be left in profound darkness in this dreadful place seemed the climax of all that was horrible ; yet this fate was

now about to befall him. In a few minutes more his exhausted light would flicker its last. He was for the first time in his life terror-stricken. Courage, indeed, seemed as useless as was fear. His fate seemed sealed; and when, after a faint flash or two, the torch, hitherto his hope, finally vanished, cold drops stood upon his brow, and he clung to his seat and the sides of the skiff for some minutes in a state of rigid and terrible horror. A short time, however, enabled him to regain that calm enduring courage for which his countrymen in all ages have been remarkable; and, recommending himself to the care of St. Mark and the Holy Virgin, he resolved deliberately to persevere to the last in his exertions for escape from the dreadful place in which he had so rashly plunged himself. With this view, he resolved to proceed slowly and deliberately, and to endeavour to ascertain, by the comparative closeness or freshness of the air, whether he was receding from or approaching to the entrance to the Adriatic. The hope was a forlorn one; but it was the only hope, and he decided to follow it to the last.

For many hours, as it appeared to him, he persevered in his dreary and depressing labour; but strength and courage are limited by circumstances, and after a time he began to feel his spirits and powers rapidly sinking, and his whole nervous system beginning to yield to the dismal and depressing influences to which he was subjected. In the cavernous windings of the watery labyrinth in which he was lost, the slightest sounds became at times greatly magnified. Gusts of air from time to time caused reverberations like distant thunder coming from under the sea; and at other times the splashing noise, made, perhaps, by some of the fish or small reptiles abounding in the mud of the lagunes, seemed to grow into the wallowings and snortings of some huge marine monster tenanted this dark and fatal abode. Before these united influences the youth's self-possession was at times on the point of giving way. More than once he stretched himself at length in his skiff, and resolved to await death without further effort, until, roused by some alarming noise, he would again start up in nervous agitation to renew

an unavailing struggle. It was during one of these last despairing efforts to rescue himself from his horrible situation, under the terrors of which his senses were becoming disordered and his powers rapidly failing, that he felt the prow of his boat strike against what seemed to be a low arch almost level with the surface of the water.

The shock of this collision was followed by a rattling noise as of some machinery at work. The sound of a deep-toned bell was heard; and on the eyes of the astonished youth a light suddenly burst, which issued from a low door-way leading to a few steps at the foot of which his boat floated. The joy of life preserved now suddenly broke upon the bosom of the young Englishman. His whole powers seemed to return at once. It needed only one spasmodic effort to enable him to spring from his skiff and ascend the stairs, when an apparition met his view which caused the blood to course through his veins with redoubled speed. Another door-way, leading to a farther series of stairs, met his astonished gaze; from which was just issuing, attended by a servant bearing a lamp, the beautiful unknown, the subject of so many of his meditations and wishes so ardent.

At the sight of Raymond the lady's attendant visibly started; and drawing from his girdle a short crooked dagger or crease such as is used by the Malays and other Asiatic marauders, was in the act of rushing upon the young Englishman, whose surprise and ecstasy were almost too great to admit of his opposing much resistance to an attack so sudden and ferocious. In an instant, however, the young girl threw herself between them, and seizing the arm of her companion addressed him by means of signs, the impassioned rapidity of which baffled description, and as a spectator would suppose, recognition. Upon the person addressed they seemed to act as a charm. Sheathing his dagger, he bent his brow almost to the dark pavement of the vaulted passage as in profound submission, and then stood motionless, extending his light towards the astonished Delancy, who also stood tongue-tied in mute wonder.

“Rash and unfortunate man!” at length said the beautiful

girl, approaching him under visible agitation, "how camest thou here? and upon what hapless quest hast thou ventured into this fatal place?" The fair girl spoke in good Italian, though with somewhat of a foreign accent, heightened, perhaps, by the incontrollable emotion which agitated her whole sylph-like frame.

"Rash I may be, peradventure, lady," said the young Englishman, "but unfortunate I cannot think myself; since that very rashness has given me once more to behold one whom, of all upon this earth, I wished most once more to see."

At these words the colour visibly heightened in the cheeks and on the brow of the beautiful girl, to be succeeded immediately by a paleness like that of death.

"Alas! signor," she said, vainly endeavouring to hide her emotion, "little do you know the price such rashness may cost you."

"If, in venturing hither, I have offended you, lady," returned Delancy, "I am unfortunate indeed. Tell me only that in this I err, and for the rest I reckon not. All I ask is, hear me ere you bid me go."

The fair girl again conversed by means of signs with her attendant, whose eyes, darting suspicious glances at the young Englishman, by no means accorded with the submissiveness of the rest of his demeanour. For a moment she hesitated, but only for a moment; when, throwing all the impressiveness of female beauty into one look and gesture, she stamped with her taper foot upon the damp floor, and pointed to a low arch which seemed to lead to the interior of the building. The tall slave, for such he seemed, quailed before the glance, and making a low obeisance, ushered the way to another flight of steps leading to the recesses of the pile, so mysterious of access, and so strangely secret and secluded.

In a few minutes after threading some winding passages, Raymond, to his astonishment, not unmixed with a thrilling sense of pleasure, found himself in the very apartment where, after his escape from perishing, he had first been restored to sense and recollection; and the tall attendant, having set the

lamp upon the table, with a low and respectful obeisance retired.

The apartment was precisely as when Raymond left it. The curtains still remained three parts drawn, and the silvery pyre of bright flame still burned upon the altar. The fair girl was the first to break silence.

"Signor!" she said, suppressing by a strong effort an agitation that rendered her voice slightly tremulous, "by what strange guidance you have found your way within these walls you best know. But be that as it may, this is no time to trifle;" and as she spoke a deadly paleness again blanched her beautiful features. "By this rash intrusion, sir, you have put your life at hazard, and, perhaps, endangered mine!"

"Holy Mary, forbid!" rejoined the young man, deeply moved, "not whilst mine is left me;" and, in saying this, he instinctively touched with his hand the hilt of the short sword he usually wore.

"Alas! signor," rejoined his fair companion, sighing deeply and looking still paler than before, "you know not with whom you have to deal, nor the perilous secrets of the fatal place to which—God knows how guided!—you have been rash enough to return."

"Then let me expiate with my life," answered Raymond firmly, "the error I have committed; only let me know that, in so doing, I have not injured one without whom I now feel that life would be valueless."

As he said this, he saw that in spite of herself the tears started into the eyes of the fair girl. In a few moments, however, she became collected, and evidently making a strong effort to appear calm, continued,—

"Young signor, who you are," she said, "and why you talk thus strangely of one whom you have scarcely seen, I know not; but this I know, that your stay here, if much longer prolonged, is death. You must now depart"—here her voice faltered—"and in doing so leave a place never meant for such as you."

The young man now felt that a crisis in his destiny was

at hand. Irresolute generally, and fearful of offending, though brave and determined where duty required courage, he in one moment felt his whole soul change within him, and taking the hand of the fair girl he passionately kissed it, forgetting in the bliss of that moment—for withdraw it she could not—the peril in which he stood, and the whole dark and mysterious chain of circumstances which had led him thither.

“Not without hope,” he said, still holding the trembling hand that he felt vainly endeavouring to withdraw itself from his,—“not without hope. Better stay and die at once, in this uncertainty, than go and linger to death in a dark despair! Only let me hope; only assure me that I shall touch this hand once again (and again and again he passionately kissed it), and I depart in joy and trust! Without that, let death come as he will come!”

“Alack, signor!” responded the beautiful girl, now deeply agitated, “you know not what you risk; you know not what you ask.”

“In making the request I risk nothing,” rejoined Delaney passionately. “Not to ask it would be to risk all,—happiness, life—nay, salvation itself. If other risks there are, let them be mine also. If in destiny we are joined, neither in joy nor in sorrow can we be divided.”

“Alas! alas! signor,” responded the fair girl, looking upon the ground with eyes now, in spite of herself, suffused with tears, “these words are rash and wild. Oh, sir!” she said, in deep agitation, and struggling in vain to withdraw her hand, “whoever you are, reflect; be wise in time. Who would unite his destinies with a being who (save one alone) has no protector, no friend, in all this wide, wide world!” And as she said the words, her bosom heaved with uncontrollable emotion, and convulsive sobs, maugre every effort at calmness, choked her utterance.

“Then the more need, fair creature,” exclaimed the young Englishman, gently drawing towards him the trembling and almost fainting girl, “have we of each other’s solace, for know that I too am an exile from the soil that bore me; and,

save the authors of my being, I know not that I have in the country that disclaims me, in this proud city that shelters me, nay, in all this world, a single friend, unless," he added, pressing the now unresisting form of the fair girl to his breast, "in this bosom I have found one."

As he spoke these words the silvery flame on the altar, which had hitherto burned with a dim uncertain light, suddenly shot up a bright tongue of fire, which illuminated the whole apartment.

By the now heated mind of the young Englishman the phenomenon was immediately seized upon as an omen of promise. Drawing his now half-fainting but beautiful companion towards the recess, where everything remained precisely as he had left them, "I have already," he said, "sworn one oath before this altar, let me now swear another, and with as deep a sincerity and as holy a faith;" and still holding the trembling and fair girl by the hand, he knelt upon one knee, and swore to be hers, and hers only, whilst life remained, invoking on his head every curse if he ever failed in his fealty, or faltered for a moment in his solemnly plighted troth.

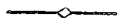
On hearing the solemn but dreadful invocation, the trembling girl would have utterly fainted and fallen had he not caught her in his arms, when, clinging round his neck, feelings now uncontrollable vented themselves in a torrent of tears, intermingled with whispered vows and passionate kisses; and thus in one short hour were two destinies accomplished, and two souls united, never to be separated, save by the remorseless touch of death. A depth of sympathy, not understood by either, and only partly recognised by both, had, from the minute when they first met, linked their fates together. Drawn towards each other's hearts by an invisible chain, these hasty and passionate vows, breathed forth in a breath so warm, were but the fulfilment of a foregone spell, felt by both, though to both a mystery.

From that moment, until guided by that tall slave into the dark Adriatic, the senses of the young Englishman reeled as in some wild but luxurious dream, in which the incidents are

more keenly felt than those of reality, whilst the feelings themselves are strung by the so potent vision beyond any pitch that waking pleasure ever attained. Peril was imminent, but peril was forgotten. The fleeting moments seemed to speed like the lightning, and, like it, were winged with fire. One incident alone drew the two enthusiasts to a momentary sense of the earth upon which they still were. When about to depart, the young Raymond rushed back again, and again encircling that matchless and slender waist with his arm, whispered to the blushing girl, "I have found an angel, and yet to me that angel is without a name."

The fair girl hesitated for a single moment. "They call me *Validè*," she softly said; "that is, *here* they call me so, but my real name is *Esperance*."

Raymond Delancy almost started. "Strange coincidence!" he said, in a low and inward tone. "That also is the name of my mother; but what of that, dearest, dearest *Esperance*?" he continued, pressing the quivering form of the beautiful girl to his bosom. "It speaks of faith and of hope; and if twice given, then twice and four times be it blessed!"



CHAPTER XVIII.

ALL FOR LOVE.

WHEN the young Raymond Delancy again entered the seagirt city of Venice, he entered it a totally changed man. The present and the future, extraordinary as were the circumstances of the first, and wild and mysteriously strange as were the prospects of the second, entirely occupied his mind, to the utter exclusion of the past. All his former feelings seemed swept away, and buried in a sudden and deathful oblivion. The sudden illness and departure of the Countess Luchesiini; the marked and moving farewell on board his galley of the accomplished Princess di Santa Croce; all were

forgotten in the whirl of feelings, new in themselves, and as absorbing as they were new.

As is customary with natures not easily impressed or moved, his heart, once touched by the fire of a sudden and irresistible passion, burned with an ardour proportionately intense and all-devouring. He seemed and felt as an incarnation of the passion that took captive his whole mind and being, and which transmuted, as it were, that mind and being to its own substance. To the now captivated soul of the young Englishman, ordinary events were as nothing; and when not subsidiary to the passion that consumed him, were passed over as uninteresting unrealities. He saw but one vision, he thought but one thought, and these were of the beautiful girl with whom he had suddenly found and cultivated sympathies at once so tender, so warm, so delicious, and so strange. In that mysterious web, composed of events and feelings so absorbing, so exciting, so thrilling, and so wild, he was totally involved; and through the atmosphere of passion in which he thenceforth breathed and lived, he saw the world and its dull realities dimly and distorted, and stripped of every hue that once could attract or fascinate.

When, therefore, a few days afterwards it was suddenly announced to him, that the squadron which he commanded was determined to be laid up in harbour, and that his command for the present was withdrawn, the event surprised him for the moment, but hardly pained him. For a moment he might, and indeed could not but feel, that leaden sense of depression which "maketh the heart sick,"—that lone sense of desertion which accompanies unlooked-for disappointment that is felt to be unmerited. Under other circumstances, his young heart must have been stabbed by that sense of undeserved injury—that suffering under capricious tyranny—under which sensitive minds secretly writhe, however calm in external demeanour.

Beyond the mere mortification of an hour, however, the whirl of agitated delight which his recent wild and singular adventure had created in his bosom, prevented his feeling the sense of undeserved wrong. Whatever interpretation

others might be inclined to put upon a guerdon so strange for a service so remarkable, the young Englishman contented himself with classing it merely as one of those capricious changes so often seen in the service of states; and, engrossed by his passion for the beautiful unknown, suffered the deprivation of his office to fade from his memory as a thing indifferent, and excusing, in the lightest way he could, to his anxious parent the conduct of the Venetian rulers, besought her to view it as he did, merely as one of the mutations to which military service, whether naval or otherwise, must be always liable.

The soul of the young Raymond Delancy was, in fact, too deeply occupied in other thoughts. He had obtained from the fair incognita, with whom his destinies seemed now to be involved, a key to the intricacies of the secret and wave-worn maze which led to the place of her retreat. By means of this direction, he might, if cool and possessed of presence of mind, safely venture amid the dark windings of that hideous net, without being liable to wander from the real path; and the time was now at hand when the adventure was to be essayed. To courage, self-possession, and a burning resolution like that of the passion-wrapt young Englishman, the undertaking could not be otherwise than easy. Again Raymond silently approached upon the dark waters of the Adriatic, the dim pile of masonry scarcely visible in the deep gloom.

As he cautiously approached the dark mass of building, a signal which he was taught to expect suddenly met his enraptured and somewhat astonished gaze. Within a short distance of each other, he suddenly discerned two bright specks, not larger than those made by the firefly, but inexpressibly keen and brilliant. Whilst he kept these effulgent but tiny scintillations in a line with each other, they continued to be visible. When the line was deviated from they disappeared. By preserving the specks in view, therefore, his course was determined; and in a few minutes he was guided to the opening into the network of watery passages which intersected the whole massive foundations of the huge pile.

Having entered it for a short distance, he cautiously lighted a lamp which he had provided for the occasion. By attending to indications continued along the bottom of the true avenue, which could be done without the aid even of a light, he soon reached the low arch which apparently barred further ingress. Impinging against it the head of his skiff, as he was instructed to do, the hollow sounds of a deep-toned bell or a Chinese gong followed, succeeded by the low rattle of the machinery by which that which was apparently a stone arch was drawn up; and in another five minutes he was in the presence of his mistress.

To endeavour to describe or record the raptures of a youthful pair thus suddenly smitten with an irresistible passion for each other, and yielding themselves up to it with all the impetuosity of youth, and all the thoughtlessness of inexperience, would be vain as useless. It needs only to say that in this case, love's triumph was complete.

In gaining and retaining the affection of the beautiful girl, to whose fascinations the hours seemed only to add, the whole soul of Raymond Delancy was now centred; whilst to her, whose inexperience was even more than her youth, the accomplished, ardent, and manly Raymond seemed nothing less than a being of another world. Nor did the mystery which enveloped the position of the lovely Validè, as she named herself, or Esperance, as he loved to name her, diminish the interest which the young Englishman took in his beautiful and strangely secluded mistress. On the contrary, by stimulating his imagination whilst it enchained his senses, it added new fuel to his passion, and removed the resplendent being, for whom his love was a sort of idolatry, still further from that world without, with the bitter realities of which he had so much reason to be disgusted. Upon his beautiful mistress, the timid dread of appearing to inquire, which the delicacy and tact of the young and trusting Englishman led him to evince, acted just as favourably. She instinctively saw that she not only commanded his love, but his confidence, and that this love had taught him that no being could be truly loved who was not truly relied upon.

Under these circumstances it required the lapse of more than one interview, beyond that which seemed to fix so strangely the destiny of two beings so unaccountably thrown together, to teach Raymond Delancy that the nurture and education of his fascinating mistress had been as far apart from the ordinary course of common life as her position seemed to be. She spoke the Italian language with remarkable purity, but with a slightly foreign intonation and accent; and though not unacquainted with Italian literature, seemed better versed in that of the East than that of the West. She not only read and spoke, though imperfectly, the Arabic and Persian characters and languages, but seemed acquainted with many Oriental compositions, and aware of many of the peculiarities both of the philosophy and superstitions of Asia. In the same way, and without seeming to enquire, the young man gradually learned that the parent of his charming and interesting Esperance or Validè was in the service of the Venetian Republic, and compelled by deep reasons of state to assume this extraordinary seclusion from the outer world.

The only other inmates were the tall Moorish attendant and two female dependants, one an aged woman, also apparently of Moorish origin, the other young, and acting as the humble companion of the still younger Validè, of a slim graceful figure, and with features and complexion that spoke her a native of India. From the secluded retreat in which they lived these females never emerged: the faithful Moorish attendant alone guarded his master in those stealthy and midnight visits which he paid from time to time to the Venetian city and her rulers.

Although, however, admitted to these clandestine interviews, and although now fully aware that his ardent passion was returned with equal sincerity and warmth by the beautiful girl who to him was worth all the world beside, yet Raymond Delancy, amidst all this whirl of adoration of an earthly goddess, soon found that even bliss like this was not without alloy. He could not avoid seeing, in spite of her efforts to conceal the truth, that during these stolen interviews, on which the lives of both seemed to depend, she occasionally

suffered under deep apprehension. The sudden shutting of a door was sufficient to cause a visible agitation in her manner; and should any hollow and uncommon noise (and such were sometimes heard amid the recesses of the vast building) become audible, the blanched cheek, the interrupted breathing, and the irrepressible tremor of the whole frame, showed how deep was the dismay which even so slight an incident could produce. On such occasions a deep and agonizing though brief pang would lance through the heart of the young man, caused by the secret consciousness that by his rashness he was endangering the peace, nay perhaps the very existence of the beautiful and innocent girl over whom he had obtained an influence so fatal. From other circumstances, misgivings, which if they were perhaps less painful were also less transient, would, in spite of himself, arise in the breast of the enamoured Raymond. Interesting, and in many respects charming and fascinating, as was the converse of the beautiful but simple girl, her lover, ardent as he was, could not but perceive that in many respects her mind and its ideas were formed upon the Oriental more than the European model, and he was at times almost startled to find, as he sometimes unexpectedly did, that subjects which he considered to be settled and sacred were by her viewed in a way altogether new to him.

Of the lore of the East, Raymond Delancy, like the rest of Europe at that period, had no knowledge whatever; and hence, at times, a casual expression used unconsciously by the unsuspecting girl would, to his apprehension, open out a vista from the contemplation of which he almost shrank, so much at variance was it with all his pre-conceived notions, however derived. Upon a mind like that of the candid but impassioned young Englishman, the result was bewildering. He was first startled by novelties of opinion or inference where he dreamed not of finding either; and again startled by discovering that his notions of Western civilisation, antiquity, science, and philosophy, were becoming altered and modified without his being well aware of it, and without any such intent on the part of the innocent and beautiful

interlocutrix who, unknown to herself, was bringing about this result. As the converse between the two lovers naturally became more familiar and diversified as their intimacy increased by time, the occasions for this singular result naturally became more frequent, and their bewildering effect upon the unprepared mind of the young and impassioned Englishman more and more remarkable.

It was during this third interview that Raymond Delaney became aware for the first time that egress or ingress from or to the secluded habitation of his mistress was only possible during the first or the last quarter of the moon. During the intervening period, to no human being was egress or entrance permitted, and to these darker hours, or of the crescent or waning planet, were the perilous visits of Raymond of necessity confined. "On the second day of the new moon, peradventure," whispered his now confiding mistress, in reply to his earnest entreaties to be instructed when he might again, in darkness and on the silent waters, await the signal which permitted him to tread the watery maze beneath the building.

"The second day of the new moon!" reiterated the love-sick young man, musing in that quiet ecstacy which such arrangements produce in young and confiding hearts, and willing to find in everything omens favourable to a course in the results of which happiness and perhaps life were embarked. "Are you aware, sweetest Esperance, how holily ominous is that day?"

"What mean you?" said the young girl, simply.

"Have you forgotten, dearest Esperance," replied Raymond, "that the eve of the second of the moon will be kept holy by all Christendom, as the joyous precursor of a day without the miraculous and blessed event of which the means of salvation had been denied us?"

"I understand," rejoined his fair companion, still in her simplicity. "True; I had forgotten that, on the second day of the new moon, the bedimmed and wintry sun will pass his extremest equatorial limit; thus typifying that benignant power who sets limits to darkness and restores the creative light; hence known by the followers of Zerduscht as 'Sol-

Generator;’ but really typical of that All-merciful, who will one day annihilate darkness and evil, and give light to the nations.”

“Dearest Esperance!” rejoined Delaney, bewildered somewhat by allusions which he only partly understood,—“dearest Esperance, what has heathenism or its legends to do with the Christian’s first anniversary?”

“Nothing,” replied the beautiful girl, somewhat surprised, in her turn, by the sudden question, and not knowing exactly how to interpret it. “Nothing; if you read as the Westerns read, literally, taking the symbol for that which it symbolizes; but much, if you read as Orientals read, not confounding symbols with the things symbolized.”

Beautiful as were the lips that gave utterance to this explanation, and beautiful as was the perfect and native simplicity in which it was uttered, the natural prepossessions of the young Englishman were, in spite of himself, moved and almost shocked by it. He paused for a few seconds, and by an effort recovering his composure, proceeded in a low tone,—

“Dearest girl!” said he, whisperingly and with a solemn reverence, “the Christian festival and its rites are not an Eastern allegory. Those loud hosannahs, that long procession of stoled priests, those solemn yet exulting strains, which on that blessed eve will sanctify the holy fane of the patron saint of Venice — St. Mark, — appertain to the Christian only, and by and for him alone were instituted.”

The fair girl looked him inquiringly in the face, and then remarked, simply, as before,—

“Institutions, as well as arts, are for the most part derivative. They begin, and are lost; and are found again, and perhaps yet again; whilst the memory of their origin rests in obscurity, or is lost amidst the darkness of uncounted ages.”

“Of uncounted ages!” echoed Raymond, again bewildered by the sublime but strange allusions of his beautiful but extraordinary enslaver. “What, dearest Esperance, have these rites to do with uncounted ages?”

“Through uncounted centuries they have existed,” was the reply; “symbols in their origin, long before the dates of

Olympiads, or yet more modern *urbe conditas*: thence handed down, but losing as they go, and now literalized in their latest revival: the dark alembic of time, the blind innovator, having sublimed away their essence, leaving the husk alone behind."

To describe the precise feelings of the young Englishman, on hearing these words, is hardly possible. Calm and self-possessed as he usually was, he was yet strongly imbued with the religious feelings of his age and country; and the first effect of a relation which, though from lips so innocent, was certainly not in accord with these feelings, was to strike a pang of cold but momentary terror into his heart. He felt a sudden distrust, he knew not why, of his position. As the sole emotion of him who unexpectedly finds himself on the brink of a precipice is to throw himself back, so Raymond Delaney seemed, for a moment, to be on the verge of a steep, over which a single step was sure destruction. Hence his mind momentarily recoiled; but only for a moment. The reflection of a few seconds in the heart of a lover was enough to produce a reaction. He resolved to treat as trifles the mere legends of a distant people, learned most likely in infancy, and only making an impression because of the romantic fancy of the beautiful girl to whom they had become familiar. So contrary was it, indeed, to all his prepossessions to believe that any one should deem of such traditions but as the wild fables of a benighted race, that feeling shaped the belief, whilst the heart of the lover at once ratified it.

"You have heard much of the East, methinks, dear Esperance," he merely observed, with a faint smile, "and are well acquainted with its traditions."

"I have studied them," answered the beautiful but simple enthusiast, "because I have been taught that they who desire to do aught really great must look to the East for their arena."

"As how, sweet Esperance?" said Delaney; again surprised by a sentiment so new to his ear, and so romantic in itself.

"Because," quietly returned the earnest and fascinating speaker, "there exists in the Oriental mind points of know-

ledge and depths of lore not dreamed of by the West. Science, from which the unreasoning shrink as from crime, and which the half-reasoning reject as visionary."

"But is such science lawful?" asked the youth, hesitatingly, and again startled somewhat.

"All knowledge given from on high is lawful," was the response. "But knowledge is of two kinds," continued the beautiful girl, earnestly. "There is inward and there is outward knowledge."

She paused for a moment; but her admiring lover spoke not, and she continued,—

"The lore of the East is inward knowledge,—esoteric. Man, there, hath studied himself, and arrived at a knowledge of the deeper secrets of his own being."

"Of his own being!" echoed Raymond, almost involuntarily.

"Of his own being. In the West, all science is exoteric—outward. And man, skilled in every extrinsic art, is ignorant of that which transcends all art—himself!"

"And what, dear enthusiast, do you infer from all this?" said Raymond.

"Only this," replied the fair girl, earnestly, "that he who can add the practical energy of the West to the hidden sciences and profounder lore of the East, will find greatness at his feet and power in his right hand!"

Passionately devoted as he was to the beautiful Validè, and eagerly as he listened to everything that fell from her lips, it was only a matter of ordinary course that the mind of the young Raymond Delancy should be gradually and unknown to himself influenced by such converse. With his position in the city of Venice he was naturally disgusted. Without apparent reason, his command had been suspended *sine die*, and his galleys laid up in harbour. Of this unexpected procedure of the signory not the slightest notice had been vouchsafed, nor any reason for it assigned.

Rumour had indeed been busy with his fame in many ways as connected with this slight, for as such it was by all, friends and foes, unquestionably regarded. By some it was attributed

to the anger or to the jealousy of the Countess Luchesini, whose reported illness and absence countenanced the tale: by others to the intrigues of the Magnifico Bembo. Others again insisted that the Marquis Spinelli, whose pretensions to the favour of the accomplished Princess di Santa Croce were no secret, had seen with fear the service rendered to that lady by the young Englishman; whilst others, yet more positive, asserted that the aged cardinal, anxious to ally his niece to the powerful marquis, and dreading the presence of Raymond, was resolved to drive him from Venice; fearful of the interest he might have created in the bosom of his accomplished and high-spirited niece.

In the mind of Delancy himself it had left a painful feeling of unexplained injustice and undeserved yet deeply premeditated injury; and this painful feeling was further aggravated by the growing ill health of the baroness, his anxious parent; whose nervous system, shattered at best, had sustained a fresh shock from these unexpected disappointments. Hence everything tended, more and more, to unsettle the mind of the young and fine-spirited Raymond, whose disposition could ill brook neglect, and the scorn that in lower minds follows the frown of the powerful; and hence, in the converse and aspirations of his beauteous Esperance, romantic, wild, and singular as they sometimes were, he found a sweet solace and the best refuge, because the most complete, from the apparent neglect, persecution, and injustice of all around him. In her eyes and on her lips he found compensation; and, a lonely and unfriended exile everywhere else, he possessed in her a world that was worth all the rest to him.

But this was not all. Another incident now came forth to bind the ardent and honourable young Englishman still more closely to the interesting and lovely object of his passion. Notwithstanding all her efforts to conceal the truth from her lover, he was too quick-sighted not to perceive that, in allowing his visits, under whatever precautions, she suffered at times under deep apprehension of the possible consequences. So deep, in fact, was her anxiety, and so perpetual

her agitation, that it quickly began to act seriously upon her health. From the watchful eye of Delancy this terrible truth could not be concealed. He saw that the conflict between affection and fear was too much for a frame finely organized, and for a nervous system peculiarly sensitive and excitable.

That he was the primary cause of this he could not but feel, and at the same time her honourable and candid nature told him that he had no right to thus trifle with the well-being of any fellow-creature, much less with that of one who was suffering a devoted attachment to him to endanger both health and life. After much and painful consideration he now became aware that there remained to him only one course now to pursue.

However rash and unadvised it might be deemed by some, had he wished it there was no avenue of escape, and as he was placed there was no powerful motive for hesitation. Until he saw the exquisite though mysterious Validè, his heart had not really been touched by the passion of love. The splendid position and matured graces of the elegant and seductive Countess Luchesini had dazzled and flattered but not enslaved him. Hence the apparent change in her feelings, whether capricious or visionary, had never really mortified even his vanity, for she had no place in his heart, though some in his esteem. For the extraordinary accomplishments and powerful intellect, as well as the unpretending beauty of the Princess di Santa Croce, he felt a deep admiration, but it had never been suffered to ripen into love, nor was he clear that she wished it, however grateful she might be on the moment for the service he had rendered. But by the at once beautiful and simple Validè his love was returned perhaps ere he well knew it to be the tenant of his own bosom.

Wealth, station, and influence, she had not to offer him; but what are these compared with the pure devotion of a heart unsophisticated by worldly seductions and unscared by worldly selfishness? Could he be ungenerous, could he be unjust, could he be unfeeling to a being who was thus risking

all for him, for whose good faith, save his own assurances, she had no security? Honour, justice, and humanity, alike forbade the thought, and he now felt himself bound to risk all in order to rescue the interesting creature who was risking so much for him, as far as possible, from the cruel position in which he had half-unconsciously placed her. For his own safety, under such circumstances, he would not have condescended to fear, but for hers he trembled. What the extent of her apprehensions was he forebore to inquire, and could not know; but the minute precautions taken on his account proved them to be great and overpowering. Under this conviction he did not hesitate to beseech his beautiful Esperance to take the only protective step now in the power of either.

Can it be a matter for wonder that, under such circumstances, the impassioned entreaties of the young Raymond prevailed, and that the blushing girl consented that he should at all risks so contrive that, before he again sought to visit the secluded building in which she was immured, he should have it in his power to plead that she was his wife?



CHAPTER XIX.

THE LOVE-TOKEN.

It was now the time of the Venetian carnival, which at this period was celebrated with extraordinary profusion and magnificence by the luxurious people of the great trading mart of Europe. At all periods of their history the merchant-princes of the sea-girt city, hemmed in as they were by the Adriatic waters, but surrounded by all the luxuries imported from all parts of the known globe that could float upon the bosom of those waters, had been remarkable for their love of pleasure.

At the time to which this narrative has reference, the Roman saturnalia, transformed by the cunning policy of the

early pontiffs into the Christian carnival, were kept up with all the profuse and expensive gaiety that delighted such a people. Venice was at all times, owing to its mercantile character, the resort of strangers, but during the license and profusion of the carnival this was peculiarly observable.

Upon the wide area of the magnificent place of St. Mark, and upon the principal quays and bridges of the city, foreigners from all climes were to be seen in numbers. Here were to be met with the gay and excitable Frenchman, full of display and ostentation; the cunning and intriguing Italian, veiling his real purpose under some mask or other; the quarrelsome Gascon and the proud and stately Castilian; the haughty and insolent Englishman, roughly profuse and bluntly generous, but more sparing of his courtesy than his coin; the silent and reserved Moor, curiously surveying the wealth which he was only an instrument in bringing together; the Arab from Aleppo, the Armenian from Smyrna and Alexandria, the heavy German, the light Greek, and the military Polander, bearded and furred in spite of the difference of climate; whilst native Venetian holiday makers, masquers, showmen, musicians, charlatans, morris dancers, wedding cortèges, actors, actresses, pulcinelli, and courtezans of every grade and description, with here and there a religious procession, made up in some sort of the same materials, thronged the great square of St. Mark, and rendered the quays and bridges almost impassable. On the water the scene was equally busy and frivolous. Gondolas, filled with gaily-dressed dames and cavaliers, threaded the canals; pleasure-boats, dressed in the colours of various nations filled the wider parts of the lagunes, the harbour, and the roads of the arsenal; whilst the sounds of music, near and distant, floated over the glittering waters, or filled the air, buoyant with the Adriatic breezes, with strains not always in concord with each other.

With the frivolous or licentious gaieties now prevalent the feelings of the young Raymond Delancy were the reverse of sympathizing. Wrapped in his domino, and his fine but pale features overshadowed by his plumed hat drawn closely over

his brows, the young soldier passed, little heeding, through the midst of the noisy, motley, but gay and amusing crowd that thronged the area of St. Mark's Place. It was in vain that sometimes a bright eye, from under the soft shadow of a velvet mask, glanced at him as he passed with a meaning that in Venice was seldom misconstrued. In vain, as he passed under a balcony or a verandah, a shower of comfits scattered by some fair hand showered upon him, or a nosegay of the costliest exotics fell at his feet. In vain black-eyed gipsies, in their characteristic costume as seen in Spain, the south of France and Italy, begged to be allowed to read the fortunes of so handsome a cavaliero, and a soldier too. All was lost upon Raymond Delancy, who, filled with sad fancies and wild imaginings, at length took refuge in the Church of St. Mark, hoping amidst its gloomy aisles to find some walk where, unannoyed by the frivolous or licentious throng, he might in a sort of solitude

“———chew the cud
Of sweet and bitter fancy.”

Here undisturbed, save sometimes by the sound of his own measured footstep upon the hollow pavement of the ancient and sacred pile, or by the reverberation caused by the simple shutting of a door, or by the sight of some official of the edifice passing slowly and almost noiselessly to some of its numerous recesses, he walked to and fro buried in thought, and revolving in his agitated mind the strange tissue of events in which he had imperceptibly been involved. As he thus paced the marble pavement of the venerable pile, the shade of evening set in. Lights appearing at intervals in various parts of the huge building showed him that night was at hand, when, just as he was preparing to quit the place, a figure passed him dressed like a priest, of which he would have taken little notice, had he not been almost startled to recognise under its cowl the small but peculiar eyes of the confessor, Padre Momoro, who on his part seemed little less surprised to recognise in the stranger, the young Raymond Delancy.

"Benedicite," said the padre in a low tone, half stopping as he recognised the young soldier; "Benedicite: let me not, signor, interrupt your meditations, of whatever kind they may be."

"That you cannot do, father," said the young man, half smiling at the priest's ambiguity of expression; "that you cannot do. I was thinking of quitting the spot as you passed."

"Then must I crave your pardon, son," rejoined the padre, with assumed mildness. "This, peradventure, is hardly the season to delay a young cavalier who may have gayer quests on hand."

There was something in the tone of the last words that sounded upon the ear of the young soldier like quiet irony. At the same time, he fancied that he saw in the confessor's manner that he really wished to have some converse with him. If his self-possession was slightly ruffled by the first impression, his curiosity was excited by the next; and he resolved to indulge it.

"You misconceive me, holy father," replied Raymond. "If there be aught you wish to communicate that may benefit me or be of service to others, no one can be readier to listen than I am. And for any communication that you, father, may see fit to make," added Raymond, in a marked tone, "no place—no time—could be more fitting."

"Amen!" said the father, humbly, and then paused. "It is indeed true, son," he resumed, "that it was my intention shortly to have sought an interview with you. And if, as you are pleased to say, I am fortunate enough to obtain it, as it were, unsought, I shall not, signor, feel the less bound to you because the boon has come in a manner unasked."

With this exordium Raymond was slightly surprised. He however merely replied by requesting the padre to proceed in anything it was his wish to communicate.

"It is one of the best and holiest duties of our sacred office," said the priest, meekly, "to be 'peace-makers on earth;' to be the promoters of good and the removers of ill-

will wherever such exist; and I rejoice, therefore, that my present mission is of this description."

"I sincerely share in that satisfaction," replied the young soldier, gravely.

"When, therefore," continued the padre, "I mention the name of one of whom the Signor Raymond Delancy may naturally deem that he has much reason to complain, I only do so with the hope of removing or weakening that impression. I allude to mine honoured patroness the Countess Luchesini," said the father, after a pause.

To say that the blood did not visibly rush into the cheeks of Raymond at this abrupt mention of the name of the countess, would be to falsify the truth. He, however, after the pause of a few seconds, at once recovered self-possession.

"It pleases you to say this, father," resumed the young soldier, with, perhaps, a slight tinge of bitterness in his tone. "But I have not said this."

"You have not, dear son," rejoined the priest, "and for the omission you deserve all honour. But you may not the less have thought it; and thoughts concealed oftentimes rankle longest!"

"Father," said the young man, still more and more surprised by the turn which the conversation seemed to be taking, "you will credit me, I trust, when I assure you that I appreciate the motives that have prompted this interview. But pardon me if I say, is it not time enough to tender explanations when they have been required? He who does not complain needs neither explanation nor atonement; and I, father, have not complained, nor mean to do so."

"Young signor," replicated Father Momoro, looking intently on the face of the young soldier, "with ordinary natures this is true, and so might be left. But excuse me, young signor, when I remind you"—and here a sort of animation, foreign to the usual manner of the priest, became perceptible—"that it is with no ordinary nature we have to deal. This does not satisfy the noble Countess Luchesini, although there are many whom it would satisfy."

"To this I can make no answer, father," said the young man, curbing his surprise as well as he was able.

"Nor do I ask you so to do, dear son," said the priest soothingly. "Now listen to me. The noble lady, whose name I need not mention again, is conscious that, on her part, she may be justly open to censure. There may have been rashness, precipitancy, and even a forgetfulness of position in itself blameable."

"Father," said the young man, interrupting the priest, "excuse me if I say this is really too painful; nor is it what I, nor any one of my feelings, wishes to hear. There may have been rashness and precipitancy elsewhere—so let it remain! To your ear, father," said the young man humbly, "such revelations may be natural and proper; but not to mine."

"Such revelations are proper anywhere when the motive that prompts them is holy," rejoined the priest. "Nor are they less so because painful, peradventure, to more than one. What may have been the cause of that noble lady's change of purpose, I know as little as you do, signor," continued the priest. "Into that 'twas not my duty to inquire; nor was it hers to divulge it. But this I know, from her own lips, that 'tis not of a nature to abate one jot of the esteem in which she has held and still holds every member, without exception, of the noble family of Delancy."

"Indeed!" faltered the young man, thrown off his guard by the singular communication of the priest.

"In saying so I only discharge a duty, gladly undertaken," said the padre, "because a Christian one."

The young soldier bowed, but did not speak.

"You doubt, perhaps," continued the confessor; "and it may be that under such circumstances you, son, are excusable in doubting! But where sincerity exists it may be tested; for truth is ever capable of proof." The padre paused, and again proceeded,—“If I crave your attention, young signor, that which I am about to say may plead my excuse,” and the priest again paused, and then resumed,—“I have said that, where sincerity is, it may be tested; and in saying

what I now say I only discharge a duty undertaken. What I am to convey is this. If there be any point, any object, which any member of the noble family of Delancy, without any exception, either wishes at present, or shall hereafter be anxious to promote, in which the aid, the countenance, or, in short, the influence of the Countess Luchesini can be of service, be it what it may, that influence shall be freely given, whether asked or not, if opportunity be given, to afford it unasked; and as this is truly said, and without any reservation whatever, of any sort or any description whatever," said the confessor, with an emphasis, the meaning of which could not be mistaken, "so let it be considered!"

The confusion and agitation of mind with which the youthful Raymond Delancy received this communication from the confessor, it would be difficult to describe. That which occasionally happens to all young and ardent minds when hurried forward by restless and engrossing passion, now happened to the young and impassioned Delancy. In such minds a sudden and unexpected incident sometimes creates a violent, though very brief reaction. Their eyes become as it were suddenly opened to their true position; and they shudder at the sequel which they see about to follow. Such was now the case with Raymond Delancy. The nobility of mind manifested in the communication of the priest, caused a sudden revulsion in the mind of the young man under which he inwardly shook.

By the generosity of sentiment thus singularly manifested, he was deeply touched; and, for the moment, his admiration of this accomplished and fascinating woman was revived. In that revival he, for the first time, vividly apprehended his true position. He felt that he had thoughtlessly brought himself to the very brink of a precipice over which he must now precipitate himself, and he felt suddenly dismayed and struck down by the sense of his own imprudence. His passion for the singularly fascinating and beautiful Validè had almost, without his knowing it, as feverous attacks often do, absorbed his whole faculties. For the moment, the

touching address of the confessor caused a reaction, the confusion of soul caused by which hardly left him presence of mind enough to know what to reply. A few seconds of agitated thought partially, however, recalled recollection.

"Father," said the young man, in a low tone, somewhat tremulous with feeling, "I shall not affect to undervalue the candour and noble-mindedness which have prompted this communication. On the contrary, I feel them deeply—more deeply, perhaps," added the young soldier, with a voice now quite tremulous with emotion, "than it is now my part to describe. Let that pass, however," said the young man, pausing, as uncertain what to say next.

The confessor watched his countenance with a sidelong and scrutinizing glance, but did not speak.

At length Raymond resumed,—

"You will pardon me, father," he said, in a firm voice, "if I do not now say anything farther,—as in reply to that which you have so kindly been the medium of communicating. Such communications call for reflection," said the young man, slightly colouring under the keen glance of the padre as he spoke the words. "Suffice it at present to say, I fully appreciate all that has passed, and have every confidence in the motive that prompted this interview. When we next meet, father," said the young soldier in a confiding tone, "I may be prepared to say more."

"At your own time, dear son," answered the padre, again darting a scrutinizing glance at the handsome but excited countenance of the young soldier.

"To-morrow then, dear father, at the same hour, we meet here," rejoined Delancy in a low tone.

The father confessor silently bowed; and turning away, vanished in the gloom which now rendered indistinct the silent interior of the sacred edifice, whilst Raymond, deeply agitated, with uneven steps left the church.

That the mind of the young man should be torn by conflicting feelings, after the occurrence of such an interview, is not wonderful. He felt, and not without these accompanying pangs of shame and compunction natural to an ardent,

honourable, and candid mind, that whatever might be the motives of the Countess Luchesini in leaving Venice, he had never loved her, and therefore ought to be the last to complain, even were the world to regard him—which however it did not—as a suitor capriciously and unceremoniously discarded. Raymond Delancy, in fact, was now deeply sensible that, in addressing that amiable woman, he had mistaken for love the aspirations of ambition, and his natural admiration of the many charms of a handsome, accomplished, and matured female, now perfect in all the graces of manner and in all the numberless fascinations of female converse. He had now become aware that he had acted rashly, hastily, and mistakenly: that, whilst he was contemplating a union with the rich, splendid, and influential countess, his heart had really gone over to another; and that, mysterious as her own conduct certainly was, the communication of the father confessor Momoro was really too considerate and kind for his actual deserts. It had also this farther effect. It left him still more bewildered as to the secret feelings which had influenced the lovely countess in her singular retreat from Venice and all intercourse with his family. Angry feeling it was now quite evident had no part in it; and it was equally clear that she regarded all ties between herself and him as severed and broken for ever.

Whilst, however, his mind was agitated with these reflections, the reaction occasioned in his feelings by the frank and singular message conveyed by the confessor threw him into a new train of reflection, which till then, engrossed by a passion that he found to be as irresistible as remarkable, he had not for a moment experienced. His mind was subjected, as it were, to a sudden rebound, and passion, ebbing for a moment, as the sea sometimes does during a volcanic convulsion, left it capable for the time of seeing the realities of events, which before had passed more like a feverish dream than actual occurrences.

All that had recently happened rushed upon his recollection, but in company with new feelings. His rescue from death from drowning, his interview with the aged inmate of

that mysterious retreat, his second escape from a horrible fate in his rash attempt to return, his interviews with the youthful and beautiful Validè, her innocent attachment, her hinted danger, her terrors, her sinking health, his own headlong, irresistible, and unreflecting passion, the force, the suddenness of his fascination, his rash and improvident vows, the mystery surrounding the fair but inexperienced girl, and all the imprudence and perplexities of his position, now rushed upon his memory at once, in the dress of an appalling reality, and not as before in the rainbow hues of a splendid vision. He felt that his honour, his good name, his happiness, the happiness of his excellent parents, perhaps his own safety and theirs, might be compromised, he knew not how, nor why, nor for what. And he became painfully aware that a few hours of unguarded and resistless passion had probably decided the destiny of his existence, and that he had staked all upon a throw, of the consequences of which he knew nothing! Then, again, his memory would recur to the singularity of her expressions as to subjects with regard to which his religion taught him that doubt, perversion, or error, was mortal sin; and to the curtained recess, the altar, and the scroll, which contained in an unknown character and language those sacred writings upon which he was taught to believe his salvation hung; and whilst he thought on these, dim visions of unholy rites and sorcery, in spite of himself, flitted across his imagination, speedily to be repelled and dismissed by another contemplation of the charms and innocence of the young and beautiful Validè, so utterly at variance with such thoughts.

This conflict, however, at last ended in one resolve. He had become suddenly aware of the difficulties, perplexities, and perhaps dangers, into which, in a state like Venice, any rash step, like that which he was about to take, might plunge him. He felt, accordingly, that friendship like that so unexpectedly offered him might be needed; and he determined, by one act, to let the noble Countess Luchesi see that he fully relied upon the sincerity of her professions and the reality of her feelings. In short, he made up his mind to

intrust to the confessor his design, and to require his assistance.

Having come, after long, conflicting, and painful meditation, to this resolve, he punctually set forth, on the following evening, to his interview with the padre at the church of St. Mark. The place to which the name of the patron-saint of the sea-girt city is annexed was as before filled with those to whom the enjoyment of the carnival, in all its license and all its frivolity, was an occupation. Through this motley group of masquers, showmen, minstrels, adventurers, gamblers, fortune-tellers, gipsies, actresses, and courtezans of various sorts and races, Raymond Delancy threaded his way as best he might, without feeling the slightest sympathy with the pursuits of the dense throng through the midst of which he was passing.

As he drew near the sacred pile, however, he could not avoid suspecting that his steps were watched by a light and slim youth, who looked like a page, and whose dress and gait spoke him probably to be the servant of some person of rank. The youth wore a mask, and was a good deal concealed by the folds of the cloak which enveloped his person: a white and soft hand, however, on which glanced in the torch-light a ring, apparently of some value, proved that he was no ordinary menial. Tripping lightly forward and half turning round, his dark eyes for a moment met those of Delancy, as if to be certain of the object of his pursuit; and when Raymond entered the massive doors of the cathedral, in the interior of which a few dim lights only glistened, to his surprise the youth was there before him. On seeing Raymond enter, he gracefully took off his plumed cap, beneath which was a profusion of glossy and beautifully curled ringlets, and making a low bow, he presented to the somewhat startled Raymond a sealed and perfumed packet, tied with a flame-coloured silken riband, and having delivered his intrusted token, without a word glided through the door by which he had entered, and disappeared.

It seemed no time, however, for the young soldier to peruse a billet of this nature, which, according to the custom of the

time, was folded in silk and richly scented, the riband which tied it being held by a broad seal. He accordingly, concealing it his bosom, entered the church ; but after proceeding to the spot where he had the night before parted from the confessor, he found that, like most persons who keep an appointment with which much anxiety is connected, he was too early at his rendezvous, as the padre was not yet arrived.

He now felt he had a few, though but a few minutes to spare, to satisfy in some degree that which only seemed a natural curiosity. Perceiving, therefore, a light burning at some little distance in another part of the edifice, he proceeded thither, and taking the sealed packet from his bosom, examined it as narrowly as he could by the dim light of the silver lamp, which threw a faint ray only amid the gloom that wrapped the interior of the church. The packet was, as he had before observed, composed of a rich silken stuff, and the flame-coloured riband which confined it, was of the finest manufacture. It was held together by a seal, the device of which was as quaint as it was expressive. It was the figure of a dove hovering, and holding the olive branch of safety and hope, whilst in the distance was the ark, tossing upon the troubled waters of the subsiding flood. Above, on a scroll, was graven the quaint device, "Dum spiro spero." Carefully dividing the riband without injury to the seal, Raymond proceeded to open the packet. It contained merely a scroll of fine vellum with a rich border, on which were engrossed in beautiful characters some lines, and a small white silken packet, also fastened and sealed much like that of which it formed one of the inclosures. On proceeding to peruse, as well as he could by the dim light, the lines on the scroll, they ran thus :—

"Blind Fortune hath her climates and her zones,
Arctic, antarctic, temperate, and hot ;
And, for a space, it e'en may be thy lot
To burn, where Sol in fire himself enthrones ;
The whilst another, envying thee, still groans,
Condemn'd to frozen plain or icy grot ;
For few there be where these extremes are not,
Or where mild zephyrs still breathe summer tones,

Yet never THOU—if, haply, one of those
That murmur under Fortune's cruel wiles—
Yield to despair, nor suffer grief to close
Thy heart 'gainst future sunshine. She beguiles
Only by fits ; and on a night of woes,
At her behest, a splendid dawning smiles."

To these lines, no signature was appended which might have given to the young soldier the slightest hint as to the quarter whence they proceeded. The quaint motto of the seal, with its accompanying device, was new to him ; and he in vain endeavoured to discover some expression in the lines which might indicate the writer or sender of them.

Reflection, however, seemed unavailing ; and he was about to open the enclosure which accompanied the lines, hoping to find there a solution of the mystery, when the clock of the cathedral heavily tolled the hour which he had fixed for meeting the confessor, and the sound of a distant footstep upon the marble pavement seemed to indicate that the priest had punctually noted the time. Concealing the mysterious packet, therefore, again in his bosom, Raymond approached the person whose footfall he had heard so distinctly amid the silence of the arched and lofty pile. He was not mistaken ; and a few seconds more brought him to the side of Father Momoro, who was awaiting him in accordance with his promise. On joining the padre, he found it difficult to conceal altogether the slight agitation into which the perusal of the lines, so mysteriously conveyed to him, had thrown him.

In spite of himself, he could not help referring them to the accomplished Princess di Santa Croce, to whom he had been fortunate enough to render so great a service. Without imputing to the young soldier more vanity than is common to youth when coupled with a fine person, her behaviour on parting with him had gone far to convince him that he excited in her breast an interest more than common. He had, however, never ventured to fancy for a single moment that, with a lady of her rank and vast possessions, such an interest could be more than transient, or that circumstances would ever allow her, even were she really inclined, to stoop to a

person so much her inferior in rank and worldly fortune as himself.

The extraordinary adventures, therefore, which befell him so soon after his return to Venice had nearly erased from his memory the scene which took place on his last interview on board the galley with the accomplished princess. The missive which he had just received in a way so singular, in spite of himself, recalled that scene to his recollection; nor could he help mentally asking himself the question, Had he not, without knowing it, inspired a passion deeper than he was aware of in the bosom of that amiable, strong-minded, and accomplished woman? Neither could he escape mentally answering his own question, "If it be so, and this reminiscence is meant as a token of it, it comes too late!" Agitated, in spite of himself, with these emotions, he joined the friar who was awaiting him, and whose cunning, sinister, and piercing eye, he fancied, took note that he was distracted by a contention of feelings not entirely to be suppressed.



CHAPTER XX.

THE SEALING INTERVIEW.

"BENEDICITE!" said the padre, on joining Delancy. "You come, son, punctually to your hour, like one that knows the value of time."

"And like one that misspends it too often, I fear, father," said the young man humbly.

"A brief shrift, signor, methinks, will serve to absolve you of that sin," replied the priest, in a complimentary tone, but yet with an intonation that seemed to give a meaning to the words which the words themselves scarcely bore.

"It is to be hoped so," rejoined Delancy, "for it is a fault, father, from which none of us occasionally are free."

The confessor bowed in token of acquiescence, but did not reply.

Finding that the priest now awaited the communication which he was about to make, the young man, after a few seconds' pause, continued,—

"I have reflected, father," he said, "with all the calmness of which I am capable, upon that which in this place you yesterday were pleased to communicate to me. Before, however, I proceed further, I must repeat, that of the causes of the changed relations between the noble lady who speaks through you and him who now addresses you I am totally ignorant."

The priest looked at him for a moment, and again let fall his gaze, not unobserved of the young soldier.

"Whatever the genius of surmise may infer, or the tongue of rumour may think fit to propagate, I repeat that of the causes of these changed relations I am utterly ignorant," said Raymond, firmly; "and when I say it I expect to be believed."

"It is not for me to contradict it, son," returned the confessor, in a tone that savoured somewhat of incredulity, "seeing that I myself am equally so, and so wish to continue. But what of this, dear son?" continued the padre, soothingly. "Why should we explain that of which no one seeks nor needs an explanation?"

"Because," replied the young soldier, proudly, "I would not have ingratitude seem to precede obligation."

"To a sentiment in itself so good," replied the priest, in a tone in which some surprise might be traced, "but at the same time so uncalled for, far be it from me to object."

"The sentiment is good, proceeding as it does from an honest tongue," continued Delancy, gravely; "but let that pass. Whatever these causes may have been, I allude to them no more; and this clears the way for me to say, that I accept these changed relations as you, speaking the sentiments of the noble countess, have explained them."

"I rejoice to hear it, dear son," replied the confessor.

"And what is more, father," continued Raymond, "I accept them in the entire spirit in which they have been dictated and conveyed."

"You do well, son," was the brief answer of the priest.

"And of this," continued Raymond, "I intend to give you the strongest proof that it is in my power to afford."

The imperfect light given by the few lamps scattered through the dim aisles of the sacred edifice in which this conference took place, was yet sufficient to show the change which came upon the countenance of the confessor as Delancy uttered these words. His look was that of a man who suddenly has reason to think that a communication, the hearing of which he would rather avoid, may be about to be made to him. Making, however, an effort to appear indifferent, he merely replied,—

"As far as the noble Countess Luchesini is concerned, dear signor, that is quite superfluous. How far your own views may dictate it is of course known only to yourself."

"I understand you, father," replied the young man, in a low tone. "I do not affect to be a disinterested party in saying what I have said, or am about to say. I have already told you that I accepted those changed relations which you, as mediator between that noble lady and myself, have so well explained, in the same candid and confiding spirit as that which I believe to have prompted the communication."

"Say on, dear son," replied the confessor uneasily.

"I shall do so, father," continued Delancy. "I need not, I believe, tell you, father," continued the young man, "that my destiny has been a strange one. An exile from my country, England, before I well could understand the cause of my misfortune, I have sought, by serving a foreign state, to win for myself another home. I set out upon this arduous quest, indeed, young and inexperienced; and you, father, are not unaware of the fatalities that have attended it. I do not impute blame to any; far from it: and if I have been the sport of fortune, I embrace my destiny, for such it seems to be."

"You speak in riddles, dear son," said the confessor.

"They shall be explained, as far as I am at liberty to explain them," answered Delancy.

"Suffice it to say that, bound by circumstances which I

cannot control, I must take a step that, though innocent, is subject to an enforced secrecy. In short, dear father, I must ask the Church to record before God vows that must still be concealed from the sight of man; and when I reveal this to you, father, I speak to you less as the spiritual guide of that noble-minded lady, the Countess Luchesini, than as a minister of that Church which is ever ready to sanctify ties knit in love and honour, though perhaps disapproved by the wise, and disliked by the proud and great."

As the now impassioned Raymond uttered these words, which he did in spite of himself with some agitation of voice and manner, the priest visibly started; and had not the dim light of the shadowy fane helped to conceal his features, the young soldier must have seen the alarm with which this intimation was received by the wily confessor. For a minute or two the twain paced the marble pavement of the darkened church in silence, neither for the moment being collected enough to continue the conversation. At length the occasional sounds from the thronged area of St. Mark's Place, which by chance, when loudest, caused a faint echo amid the shadowy aisles of the sacred building, seemed to recall Father Momoro to something like composure.

"Son," said the confessor, in a low and grave tone, very different from the soothing voice which he knew so well on occasion how to assume, "were I to say that you had not surprised me, or that others may not be surprised by this intimation, I should say what was false."

"I am prepared, of course, for that, father," interrupted the young soldier, somewhat bitterly—for the hesitation of the confessor had somewhat startled him—"for that I am, of course, prepared; but of the motives for an act, in itself unobjectionable either in the eye of religion or morality, I must be permitted to be the judge, as I must answer for the consequences."

"To that position I have nothing, dear son, to object," said the father, recovering his coolness by an effort. "On that the laws of the Church are clear; and God forbid that I should either evade or disobey that which HE has enacted,"

continued the confessor, crossing himself reverently as he spoke. "But," continued the confessor, "the Church, dear son, is bound to make distinctions where distinctions exist. An act may be innocent, nay, praiseworthy, in the abstract, and yet rash, and also questionable, under given circumstances. In such cases," said the priest, "the Church, while she sanctions the act abstractly, does not, therefore, sanction the rashness. She rather counsels consideration; and those, dear son, who solicit her aid should not be disinclined to ask nor to take her advice."

"Whilst my path is a righteous path, I have not been accustomed," said the young soldier, proudly, "to fear danger by the way."

"Not unless when others are involved," returned the priest, mildly; "and then it is most to be feared."

"I own it, father," rejoined Raymond, gently.

"You do well, dear son," was the reply of the confessor. "In so doing, you do well. Though not a Venetian, you are no stranger, signor, to the usages of this state of Venice—to the pride of her merchant-made nobility—to their cruel vindictiveness, when they fancy their privileges or their order outraged—to the jealousy of the signory—to their distrust of strangers—to their proneness to listen to secret and anonymous accusations, and to their aptitude to take up each other's cause."

Raymond nodded a silent assent.

"It behoves you, therefore, son, to consider," continued the priest, soothingly, "how far you may involve yourself and all who wish you well, before you take any step, however laudable in itself, which may disappoint the hopes, break up the arrangements, or set at nought the prejudices of a grandee of this state of Venice. They are full of pride as is the evil one," said the priest, speaking low, and crossing himself a second time, "and as vindictive as proud, and as ready to back each other's revenge. 'Offend a grandee deeply, and beware the lion's mouth!' That is an infallible rule in Venice!"

"I have heard as much," said Delancy, coldly.

"Nay, the Church," continued the father, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "albeit the cardinal is so potent in the signory—has not been always able to protect her sons even in the exercise of a sacred duty. Judge what the consequence might be were *he* your enemy."

"Do not fancy, father, that I undervalue advice that I know to be sage," replied the young man, in a tone that savoured somewhat of bitterness, "when I say that, luckily, it is in my case inapplicable. You do me too much honour, father. There is no magnifico in all this Republic, as they call it, who will trouble his quiet, much less break his rest, for aught that pertains to a poor English exile like Raymond Delancy."

"Be not too sure of that, son," said the confessor, in a tone of half surprise.

"I cannot, father, be too sure of it," was the response. "What cares the signory for my fate, be it what it may? Say that I, a stranger, whose name they never wish to hear, am wedded to a stranger whose name they never heard—can that, however remotely, encroach upon their noble privileges, or endanger the state which they take care to govern?"

The confessor, as the young soldier thus delivered himself of a secret that sat uneasily upon his bosom, suddenly stopped, with the air of a man that is indeed taken by surprise, but suddenly also relieved of a great weight. Nor had he sufficient mastery over his countenance to conceal this altogether from Raymond, who looked him in the face somewhat inquiringly, as not knowing how exactly to construe the change. The priest, however, not by any means unobservant of Raymond's feeling, cunningly, as was his wont, timed his tone and manner to the new circumstances.

"We seem to be fated, son," said the confessor, with an almost smile, "to deal to-night in the unexpected and mysterious! Doubtless the union of two strangers can hardly trouble the peace of Venice! But this is not a matter to be thus lightly treated ——"

"Not by me at least," interjected the youth, gravely.

"Nor by me, I hope," responded the confessor, relapsing

into a studied solemnity of manner, in accordance with the gravity of his young and ardent companion. "Nor by me, I hope—let me repeat it—and then pardon me, dear son, for that which I must venture to add. It is not, as you well know, any part of our holy calling to pry into secrets not voluntarily imparted, which none need to be that are innocent in themselves—pure in intention, and sanctified by honour. If therefore I venture to put a question before I go farther as to that which you entreat me, attribute it only to my consideration for yourself, and not to any other less worthy motive."

"Ask what you please, father," said Raymond; "there is no need for the least hesitation on that score."

"Then tell me, dear son, before we proceed farther, is the step which you meditate, and is the resolve which leads to it, rendered necessary and irrevocable by circumstances?"

"It is both, father," responded Delancy. "It is necessary, as involving the safety of another as well as perhaps my own. It is irrevocable, because a pledge of honour cannot be recalled, and because I would not, if I could, recall it."

"And you know of no lawful impediment in the way of the course you propose to follow?"

"None whatever," was the reply.

"The secrecy you aim at is then the result of fortuitous circumstances only, dear son?"

"Of fortuitous circumstances only, which time may, and I hope speedily will, remove."

"It is enough, dear son," said the confessor. "I neither have the wish, nor do I feel I have the power, canonically, to refuse your request."

"I am much bound to you, father," replied the young man.

"All that my duty bids me counsel is," said the confessor, "not to act too suddenly upon a sudden resolve."

"The resolve is not sudden, father," replied Raymond, in a low tone of voice, not without an ominous sadness in it. "For months I have foreseen that circumstances might lead to this. My fortune has been a wayward one thus far, and I have perceived, without wishing to avoid, the meshes

of this destiny which has been gradually closing round me."

"Then God's will be done!" responded the confessor, solemnly; "and let us be sure, son, that He will order all for the best."

"Amen!" was the response of Delancy. "It were sin to doubt it, and from that sin I am very far, believe me, father."

The padre and his young companion continued to pace the solitary aisle of the church for a few minutes longer without speaking, the priest apparently engrossed with his own thoughts. At length he again addressed Delancy:—

"To whom, dear son, is the manner of this to be intrusted?"

"I have imparted it to you, father," said Delancy, "to prove how fully I trusted you and the noble-minded lady whose messenger you have been."

The confessor paused a few seconds, and went on. "The place you leave to me, then?"

"I do, father. The day and hour must be mine, and the latter must be one of darkness," gloomily added the young man.

The priest looked him in the face for a moment, with an expression that seemed made up a little of pity and a good deal of bewilderment, and paced the marble pavement of the church in silence, as before.

"At length," he continued, in a low tone, "you are a soldier, young signor, and unaccustomed to fear."

"I am so."

"And therefore will not dread the deserted wing of the Palazzo Luchesini at midnight?" said the father.

"I know not why I or any one else should fear it," replied Delancy, in some amazement.

"It has an ill name, that is certain," said the priest, "and unless tradition can lie, wild and strange deeds of darkness have been transacted there."

"Against the powers of darkness, if such you mean, father," said the young soldier, "a good conscience is the best panoply."

“And faith in Him who trampled these powers under His feet,” added the priest, crossing himself.

As the confessor said this, the young Raymond could not repress a sense of awe, accompanied by a chilly, half-shuddering sensation. The strange scenes he had witnessed in the retreat in the Carthusian convent, the alcove, the altar, and the silvery fire, all rushed upon his imagination, and a hundred cold misgivings seemed banded together to chill his resolves and damp his ardour. It was too late; and recovering self-composure by an effort, he addressed the confessor in a way to close the conference.

“This interview, father,” said Delancy “must now draw towards an end. The time I shall apprise you of by a sure missive. Let me, however, learn from your own lips the particulars necessary for me to know and to observe.”

“You say well, son,” replicated the confessor, “and a few words will suffice. Having ascended the broken stair that leads up to a walled quay of the eastern wing of the palace, turn to the left and go round the angle of the building. Count your steps from the angle, and sixty of them will bring you pretty exactly to a narrow and short flight of steps leading to a low arch. Enter it, and in a few steps more you will come to a heavy door, which, however, you will find open. All will be in darkness, but do not on any consideration venture to use a light. Go forward, and after a short time, and after a turn in the narrow passage, you will arrive at a small lamp, and a few paces farther at a door, which is your destination, opening as it does to an ancient chapel, which has, together with the whole of that ancient wing, been long disused. I shall meet you there, and I must covenant that you bring only one attendant, and that you speak, dear son, only what is necessary to the holy rite in which you seek to participate.”

“I shall obey your instructions, father, to the letter,” said the young soldier; “of that assure yourself; and for the present, farewell!”

“God’s blessing and that of our Lady go with you, son,” said the confessor; and with slow steps Raymond left the

church, his mind occupied with feelings which he longed to indulge in solitude. He, however, could not help observing that after the confessor became fully aware of his position and intention, he passed from a state of visible alarm to one of ill-concealed satisfaction. This Raymond perceived, in spite of all the efforts of the priest to conceal his changes of feeling. The difficulty was how to construe these appearances; for he saw as little reason for alarm in the first instance, as for satisfaction afterwards. To ponder upon the matter was, however, useless; and dismissing it, as best he might, from his thoughts, he proceeded, in the solitude of his own chamber, to examine further the packet which had been so strangely put into his hands under the gate of St. Mark's church.

A re-perusal of the poetical lines did not, whatever might be his imaginings, afford him any certain indication of the sender. His thoughts unquestionably, in spite of himself, reverted to the accomplished and strong-minded Princess di Santa Croce; but he shrank from the conclusion that, during his brief intercourse with the noble lady on board his galley, he could have made without intending it a serious and lasting impression upon her heart. The contents of the smaller packet, however, when unfolded, were such as to leave less doubt in his mind, both as to the quarter whence the packet came and as to the real and secret feelings of the princess. On unfolding the second enclosure, which was of rich white silken stuff, Delancy found that it contained a lock of hair, beautifully plaited and held together by means of a ring of gold through which it was passed.

On examining the lock of hair minutely, it was precisely similar in colour and fineness to the tresses of the Princess di Santa Croce, which were remarkable for their luxuriant beauty; and on taxing his memory further, Raymond hit upon another corroborative proof that the sender of this expressive missive could be no other than the accomplished princess. In such of the features of the youth who, at the gate of St. Mark's church, had delivered the packet into his hands, as his half-mask enabled him to perceive, he fancied

he discovered lineaments not unknown to him. With the eye in particular, which was black, piercing, and brilliant, he thought he had some former acquaintance. Recollection seemed to confirm this, for in the dark eye of the supposed page he now believed he recognised that of the female attendant of the princess, which was remarkable for a piercing brilliance. Putting all the circumstances together, he found it impossible to help believing that the princess must be the sender of the significant lines and their still more significant accompaniment; nor could he upon the lines so accompanied put more than one construction.

His conviction of this truth was followed by a brief depression of mind, which he found it to be impossible to resist or to shake off. Fortune and destiny seemed cruelly to sport with him. Again, just when it was too late, had a capricious and singularly contradictory fate placed rank, power, and wealth before him and almost within his actual reach, as if to let him feel what his wayward lot had determined he should lose at the moment he might have grasped it. It was true that from the Venetian signory, from the pride of the nobles, merchant-sprung as they were, of the sea-girt Republic, and from the politic haughtiness of the jealous but aged churchman, the uncle of the princess, violent opposition to such a consummation was to be too surely expected. But the cardinal was now on the verge of life, worn out by age, anxiety, and business; and as the bulk of the large landed possessions of the principality of Santa Croce lay beyond the territories of the Republic, their mistress might easily have set at defiance the powers and anger of the dark and vindictive rulers of Venice. Thus a splendid destiny had again presented itself to him, at the very moment when his own perhaps precipitate rashness, the fruit of a sudden and resistless infatuation, had rendered it too late.

He would have been more than human—his breast must have been completely purged of craving ambition and the pride of success, had this singularly perverse combination of trying circumstances not agitated him deeply at the moment

of their occurrence. As he, after a long and disturbed contemplation of them, carefully locked in his cabinet the lines and the lock of beautiful hair that accompanied them, a few bitter tears, in spite of himself, fell upon them. The whole conduct of the high-minded, and interesting, and admirable sender rushed back upon his memory. At such a moment the retrospect was keenly bitter, almost to agony; and as he deposited the precious relics in safety, he sighed deeply and distressfully, mentally exclaiming, "Better, far better, had I never seen them, than thus have seen them only when too late."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE URSULINE NUNNERY.

NEAR to the city of Vicenza, in the Lombardo-Venetian territory, and upon the beautiful banks of the Bachiglione, stood a convent of the "holy sisterhood of St. Ursula," usually denominated "Ursuline Nuns." It is a part of the duties of the sisterhood of St. Ursula to join to the exercise of religion the secular instruction of female youth; and consequently this convent, besides being a religious establishment, was a select school, in which were educated young females of the best families of Vicenza, Verona, and their surrounding vicinities. The convent had been originally founded by the princes of Santa Croce, upon whose lands it stood, and was much visited and cherished by the accomplished Princess di Santa Croce, who not only added to its endowments, but liberally stocked its library with select works of the best kinds, secular as well as religious, and who took also great delight in superintending the system of education carried forward within its walls.

The situation of the convent was one of considerable beauty as regarded natural scenery. It was placed close by the Bachiglione, the placid stream of which was here of

considerable width, and navigable by boats of moderate burden. Its site was at the foot of a low sloping hill upon the bank of the river, which, at this portion of its course, runs in the midst of a plain, only varied here and there by slight undulations near the stream. The building was a quadrangle, one side of which was close to the Bachiglione, which flowed gently past the slight eminence on which it stood. This side of the quadrangle was used for the purposes of education, being inhabited by the young ladies who were pupils of the establishment, and including under its roof a spacious library and studio or school-room. Its windows looked upon and across the river, having a rather extensive view over a level but well wooded country, studded with, here and there, a small village or farm-stead, and numerous vineyards and orchards, surmounted occasionally by a tower, or campanile, or spire of some village church.

Another side of the quadrangle, where the great gate was placed, was occupied by the servants of the establishment. The rest was devoted to the nuns, and looked into the spacious garden, vineyard, and orchard of the nunnery, running up to the top nearly of the rising ground behind, and coming down to the river's brink. These grounds were shut in by a lofty wall covered with fruit-trees; and the two sides, beyond the wall, were sheltered by a wood of lofty trees of the various kinds common to Lombardy. The interior of the quadrangle was planted principally with flowering shrubs, and was enlivened by a fountain of beautifully limpid water; whilst round the whole interior ran elegant cloisters, in which the inmates might always walk, unscorched by the sun, unwet by the rain, and sheltered from the wind.

In a small matted parlour which overlooked the placid bosom of the Bachiglione, now bright as gold beneath the beams of the declining sun, and hardly showing even a ripple to testify the existence of a breath of air, sat the aged Cardinal di Santa Croce in deep conversation with an elderly female of dignified air dressed in black. This lady was the superioress of the convent. Her features, which had once

been rather fine, wore an air of pain and anxiety, joined to a deference almost approaching to dread for the cardinal her guest, to whose deeply furrowed and wrinkled visage she rarely ventured to raise her eyes as she conversed with him.

The matted parlour, or small refectory, in which they sat, was usually set apart for visitors, and was at the extremity of a corridor which extended along the entire length of that side of the building. Its broad and latticed window, which occupied the greater part of one side of the room, looked down upon the wooded stream that flowed silently past. Its floor was matted, its walls plainly panelled, and its furniture antique, heavy, and mostly plain; the only ornament being a half-length portrait of the founder in a massive, richly cut frame, and now dark with age. Beside the window, upon a quaintly carved, cushioned, and tall-backed antique chair, sat the cardinal, and near him, upon a covered stool, the lady superioress, whose air betokened the anxiety which the conversation occasioned as it went on.

"If I understand you aright, holy mother," said the cardinal, "you have then recently observed an alteration in the princess, my niece?"

"A slight one," said the lady superioress. "The princess was, as your eminence knows, solid always in disposition rather than gay and volatile; but recently I have remarked that she has been more tactiturn and grave than is usual with her."

"As arising from agitation of mind?" asked the cardinal.

"As from an occasional failure of spirits," was the answer of the superioress.

"In her conversations with yourself or with any of the inmates of this establishment with whom she condescended to talk familiarly, did you ever," asked the cardinal, "hear the name of the noble Marquis Spinelli mentioned?"

"I believe I may recollect such a mention once or twice, or perhaps oftener," was the reply of the lady abbess.

"And how was it received by the princess my niece?" inquired the cardinal.

"She made no remark of any kind, as I remember," was the response of the lady.

"Then it was merely received like any other ordinary topic of conversation?" said the cardinal.

"Not precisely so, your eminence," answered the superioress. "I thought I could observe that she disliked the allusion in question; and she always changed the conversation, though without remark, or any other symptom of dislike."

The cardinal paused; and knitting his brow seemed to commune with himself for some minutes. At length he resumed:—

"Is your observation, good mother, of this tendency in my niece recent?" asked the churchman.

"It is only somewhat recently that I have been led to observe it so particularly," was the reply.

The cardinal was again, for a space, silent and buried in reflection. Turning, however, his keen gaze again upon the lady superioress, he resumed his inquiries.

"Have you, dear mother," he said in a low hesitating tone, "or has any member of this sacred establishment, had any reason for supposing that the princess my niece has ever thought of adopting a conventual life?"

The lady superioress paused, as if at a loss what answer to give; but the cardinal with a little change of phrase repeating the question, she at length replied,—

"I can hardly answer the question of your eminence by a direct affirmative. Yet it must be confessed that of late the princess has appeared, on more than one occasion, to leave this seclusion with a growing regret; and that on some occasions also she has made use of expressions which certainly may be construed as arguing some possible predilection for the peace and uninterrupted retirement of a life devoted to God rather than the world."

"As how, holy mother?" inquired the aged cardinal, his thin lip quivering with an anxiety and nervousness which he might not suppress.

"Merely in this wise," answered the superioress, evidently

alarmed lest she might have said too much,—“merely in this wise, that on allusion being made to her high birth and great possessions, she has besought those who had peace and content, though destitute of possessions, to rest satisfied with their lot; and not to conclude that happiness or freedom of mind were necessarily the companions of birth and wealth, which were more often accompanied by envy and followed by persecution.”

“Persecution!” echoed the cardinal, half unconsciously, and as if forgetfully thinking aloud. “Is the offer of high and honourable alliance ‘persecution?’”

“Your eminence will pardon me,” interrupted the lady superioress, “if I remind your eminence that these are topics into which it becomes not me to enter. What meaning was attached to the word by the illustrious lady, I cannot pretend to judge. But she, I believe, really used it; possibly to the surprise of those who heard,” added the superioress, deprecatingly.

The remark of the cardinal, however, proved that he at once connected the phrase imputed to the princess to her dislike of the pretensions of the Marquis Spinelli; and this the lady superioress could not but perceive. The words, however, could not be recalled; and the aged politician again relapsed into abstraction of thought, as if chagrined to the utmost by what he had learned.

From this brief fit of musing he was roused by the deep and loud sound of the convent-bell, which was rung with some violence by some one at the gate; and which was soon followed by the appearance of one of the lay sisters, or boarders, who came to inform the cardinal that a stranger requested an immediate audience of his eminence, if possible.

“Did he give no name?” asked the cardinal.

“He did not,” was the reply. “He said it was of no consequence, as he was not unknown to your eminence.”

“Is he an ecclesiastic?” asked the cardinal, who appeared somewhat surprised by the application.

“His dress bespeaks him so, please your eminence,” answered the lay sister.

"Let him be admitted," said the cardinal, after a moment's pause.

The lay sister retired; and in a few minutes a priest, apparently wearied to the utmost by the haste with which he had travelled, was ushered into the apartment, which he entered with a low and profoundly reverent obeisance; and the aged cardinal almost started on recognising the peculiar figure, and the small keen deeply-cunning eye of Father Momoro.

On the entrance of the priest, the lady superioress rose, as about to retire; on seeing which, the cardinal courteously motioned her to reseate herself, observing to the padre, "Anything you may have, father, for my ear, may be safely delivered in this presence."

"I crave pardon of your eminence," rejoined the padre, again making a low reverence; "but that which I have to impart cannot be divulged to any ear but your own."

"It must, then, deeply concern others as well as myself," remarked the cardinal in a low tone, courteously bowing to the lady superioress, who immediately retired. "We are now alone, father. What is it that you would impart?" and, as the churchman said this, he pointed to the cushioned stool on which the lady superioress had been sitting; a hint which the travel-tired priest took care not to misunderstand.

"Before I venture to impart to your eminence a matter which I believe to concern you very nearly, allow me to say that I do so only as relying upon the profoundest secrecy as to all I may be called upon to say or do," remarked the father, in a low and hesitating tone.

"You may safely do so, father," answered the cardinal, whose anxiety was now apparent in his countenance.

"God forbid that I should doubt it!" rejoined the priest, humbly.

"Your eminence," he went on, "has been pleased to trust me thus far. You have desired me to elicit for you the real cause of the sudden and mysterious breaking off, or at least discontinuance, of certain engagements, generally believed, or indeed known, to exist between the noble lady in the

relation to whom I hold an important and sacred sacerdotal office—the amiable Countess Luchesini, and a young Englishman, also of noble birth, the Signor Raymond Delancy.”

“I have desired you to do this, father,” said the cardinal, eagerly. “Is it accomplished?”

“I regret to tell your eminence it is not,” rejoined the confessor.

The cardinal’s visage fell.

“There is a mystery connected with it which, if really known to that noble lady, she keeps locked within her own breast.”

“Then to what points this unexpected visit, father?” asked the cardinal, somewhat sharply. “I had understood you had somewhat of consequence and importance, relative to that confidential trust, to impart.”

“I trust I have,” was the answer of the confessor. “But before I can be sure of that, and before I can feel myself in a position to impart that which I know, for I must not do it lightly even to the ear of your eminence, I must throw myself upon the favour of your eminence so far as to ask for one preliminary explanation; without which, performing the sacred functions that are my duty as they ought to be performed, I cannot feel myself authorized to go further.”

Accustomed as the aged politician was to command his countenance, he could not conceal the unexpected surprise created by this singular exordium of the cunning and oily Father Momoro.

“You speak in riddles, father,” answered the cardinal, after a momentary silence. “What explanation can be required in such a case?”

“A very obvious one, I make bold to say,” was the answer of the confessor;—“that is to say, when your eminence shall have considered the whole circumstances.”

“Peradventure it may be so,” said the churchman hesitatingly, motioning the padre to proceed.

“Your eminence, it is true,” continued the confessor fixing his keen, piercing, and cunning eyes upon the ground, “intrusted me with the delicate commission of unravelling, if I

could, the causes of a breach of engagements, publicly talked of and acknowledged, but most mysteriously broken off."

The aged cardinal nodded.

"But of the causes of the anxiety of your eminence to penetrate this mysterious proceeding, you have been pleased to leave me totally ignorant. I can therefore only guess at that of which I have no knowledge whatever."

"I am at a loss to know, father," answered the cardinal, more surprised than before, "what necessity, on your part, there can be to guess at motives with which you have nothing to do; I mean as it seems to me."

"Of that necessity I must confidently leave it to your eminence to judge," said the confessor; "but your eminence can only do so after you shall have been made aware of all the circumstances. There is no other way," added the priest; "or far would it be from me to talk thus to your eminence."

The cardinal felt that the priest had him at advantage, and acted accordingly.

"Proceed, dear father, there is no occasion for apology," was the soothing reply.

"I have been compelled, then, by circumstances," continued the confessor, "to guess at motives which were not communicated, and the communication of which I had no right to expect. But such was the force of circumstances. I had no choice left," added the father: "for that your eminence will give me credit."

The cardinal again motioned him to go on.

"Your eminence then will pardon me for saying that which it is not in my option to leave unsaid?" continued the padre, inquiringly.

The cardinal again bowed an affirmative.

"The conclusion, then, I could not but draw was this," proceeded the confessor in a low and deferential tone. "I felt compelled to conclude that urgent circumstances had in some way connected the interests of your eminence, or the interests of some one of the illustrious family of which your eminence," added the priest, cunningly, "forms only one of the ornaments, with this mysterious conduct on the part of

the first named illustrious lady relative to the young Signor Delancy."

The aged cardinal visibly started at this well-managed disclosure on the part of the wily confessor, which, without being expressed fully in words, was entirely understood by him to whom it was addressed. The politician, however, at once saw the course to be taken.

"And supposing, father," he rejoined quietly, "supposing, I say," laying a marked stress upon the word, "that your conclusion may be just, I must be allowed to ask, before going further, to what would such an admission lead?"

"Of course," rejoined the priest, deferentially, "that is a question to which your eminence has a right to have a reply—and an explicit reply."

Again there was a slight motion of acquiescence on the part of the churchman.

"It would lead to this—and here your eminence will see the important point to which I have made so bold as gradually to bring your eminence—it would lead to a knowledge, on the part of those most concerned, of a change in the position of the fortunes of this young Englishman, such as is calculated, as I believe, to put an end at once to the anxiety of your eminence for any portion of that illustrious family in whose welfare you naturally feel an almost paternal interest."

The sudden and agreeable surprise created by these words in the breast of the aged churchman, he did not deem it advisable to attempt to conceal. On the contrary, he rose from his seat; and, advancing towards the priest, who also rose, took his hand, as one friend might do that of another.

"Father Momoro," continued the churchman, assuming his most winning and confidential tone, "with you I have no reservations to make. Of your devotion to my service and to that of my family, I cannot for a moment bring myself to doubt. That is out of the question; and I wish you to assure yourself of it."

The priest bowed with the air of one who only acknowledges a compliment due to him.

"And let me, father, assure you farther," continued the

cardinal, "that for such communication as you are now about to make, neither secrecy nor gratitude shall be wanting on my part nor on that of my family."

"Your eminence," said the priest, with another deferential bend, "is pleased to assure me that which certainly does not need any such surety. Allow me, however, to inform your eminence as to one point that still remains unexplained."

"Certainly," rejoined the cardinal, reseating himself; but not without some slight indications of anxiety in his countenance and manner, whilst he motioned to the confessor to follow his example.

"It is my bounden duty then to acquaint your eminence," the confessor went on in a low tone, "that the knowledge which, so fortunately I trust for the illustrious family of your eminence, I have been enabled to obtain, I have yet only obtained upon conditions which must be sacred, and in which my conscience" (here the priest crossed himself) "is deeply engaged."

The cardinal looked for a moment, with a scrutinizing glance, in the face of the confessor, whose eyes were reverently bent towards the floor, and then continued the conference like one determined to sift his informer to the uttermost.

"God forbid! father, that I," said the cardinal, "should wish any man to violate his conscience, or to tamper with ties that are sacred!"

"Thank God!" said the priest, as if grateful for the contingency; "there is no need of that. There is yet a way to satisfy your eminence without violating the letter of a bond which must unquestionably be preserved sacred and intact."

The cardinal again darted a scrutinizing glance at the visage of his interlocutor; merely saying, "'Tis well, father," and making a sign to the priest to go on.

"I need not remind your eminence," said the confessor, in a somewhat subdued tone, verging on a half-whisper, and letting drop his eyelids so as to shroud the expression of his keenly twinkling and cunning eye, "that there are cases in which information may be conveyed better through the eye

than the ear; cases in which it is less the business of the informant to teach, than to put it in the power of an inquirer successfully to draw conclusion from what is witnessed."

"There may be such, father," rejoined the churchman; an uneasy surprise again stealing upon his mind at this studied circumlocution of the confessor.

"And as your eminence," continued the father, "has graciously condescended to allow me to draw conclusions without offence given, I cannot but conclude that this is one of them."

"Father, you again deal in mystery," observed the cardinal, gravely.

"Not farther than circumstances impel me so to do," rejoined the confessor; "and I must crave your eminence to grant me indulgence, though only as far as it is absolutely necessary. I ask no more."

The cardinal leaned anxiously forward in his seat, whilst the confessor proceeded in a lower tone than before,—

"There exists only one member," said the priest in a slow, hesitating, whispering tone, "of the noble and renowned family, of which your eminence is at once the head and guide, to whom it is, by the utmost stretch of credulous fancy, possible for me to imagine that the affairs of the young Englishman, Raymond Delancy, can have any direct interest."

The cardinal visibly changed colour as the confessor spoke, but uttered no word of interruption.

"I think I need not tell your eminence," said the confessor, hesitatingly, "that (however painful it may be) I can only in saying this, be possibly supposed to allude but to one already sufficiently conspicuous by her beauty and rare accomplishments, and therefore not needing to be further designated.

Again the colour of the aged churchman went and came, and his lip visibly trembled, as he nodded a slight and stately acquiescence in that which the confessor so cautiously said.

"Your eminence will at once appreciate the importance of what I now have to say," continued the confessor, "having

graciously followed me thus far. It is fortunately in my power, provided I be trusted, not to make communications to any one, but without violating the letter of the bond which deters me, to afford that illustrious lady an opportunity to witness that which will speak more strongly than words can do. For, as your eminence well knows, where the truth of the evidence is manifested along with the evidence itself, there cannot exist longer room, in any mind, for either doubt or hesitation. To indicate this to your eminence, as I best might, was the purpose of my journey hither; and I need only add, that that which I offer to do I am ready to do, if I am fortunate enough to obtain the aid and sanction of your eminence."

All the self-command, however extraordinary, of the practised and aged politician could not suppress the signs of agitated satisfaction which gleamed from the features of the cardinal on hearing these words. Rising at once from his seat, he frankly accosted the priest, coming at once to the subject, and taking it up where the wily priest had left it.

"Father Momoro," he said, hurriedly somewhat, but with a freedom and decision not very usual with him, "further explanations, at this moment, would be superfluous: only resolve me, father, as to one single point; what time is allowed us ere this can be accomplished?"

"If your eminence," said the priest, humbly, "be pleased to trust me, no time should be lost."

"Father Momoro, you shall be trusted," was the answer; "and if I have my way, you shall be implicitly trusted. I make no terms with you. I see straightforwardness of intention and devotion to me and my family, and am satisfied. Now, go and take some refreshment. In one hour more I shall be at your service."

The priest, bowing lowly and without saying a word, left the apartment; and within the hour, the two churchmen and their escort were slowly winding their way down the bank of the now dark and solemnly rushing river, lighted only by the stars, on their road to Venice.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CABALISTIC DOCTOR.

SOME time before the noble exiles of the family of Delancy sought a refuge in the Venetian Republic, there had appeared, at uncertain intervals, in the city of Venice, a personage with whom a good deal of mystery was connected. Judging by complexion, dialect, and other less marked and minor characteristics, he would have been considered to be an Arabian by parentage, and a physician by education. It was, however, believed by some who had access to him that he had not only studied in Arabia and India proper, but also in Spain; and certain it was that he oftentimes, though not on all occasions, affected to wear the costume of a doctor of medicine of the university of Salamanca.

It was whispered, however, though with the utmost caution, by those who had access to him, that the secrets of the healing art constituted by no means his only study; but that the horoscope of human life was not unknown to him; that he was skilled to draw their secrets from the stars; and by casting the nativities of men, to make himself partly master both of their future and their past. It was fully believed by some, that he had revealed, to more than one noble family, secrets which they had believed to be confined to themselves; and that by the influence which this gave him, and by the fear which it inspired, he had been enabled to assist in bringing about events, as to which his share was as extraordinary as it was hidden and imperceptible, except to those immediately influenced. Hence his secret intercourse with some of the most powerful noble families of Venice was more than suspected, and the impunity with which he was believed to practise acts forbidden by the piety and religion of the Christian sufficiently accounted for.

By the jealous suspicions either of the Church or of the

dreaded Council of Ten; he had never apparently been touched; yet by certain powerful members both of that Church and that council it was thought both his singular accomplishments and darker arts were known or suspected. It was whispered that men resorted to him by stealth, who would not have yielded up their secret unless wrenched from them by torture; and that though his name was unknown, his revelations had by times not been without their effect even in the secret councils of the Republic. In various quarters it was rumoured that his penetration into some of the most precious and secret *arcana* of alchymy had secured him the protection of some potentate, powerful in the chancery of the Republic, and able to shield him in case of need, if called in question by the superstition of the time; whilst by some it was surmised that by his skill in pharmacy he could compound, as it was said Cornelius Agrippa did, potions which could change even hatred into love, or, if he listed, earn the wages of hatred by subtle drugs, the secret administration of which would imperceptibly destroy human life. Be this as it might, the secrecy with which he was enveloped was extraordinary.

He was never seen beyond the walls of the house which he was known at periods to inhabit, in a remote and unfrequented part of the city; yet it was believed that there hardly stood a palace in that city of the halls of which he was ignorant; and there were not wanting those who averred, such was his power of changing his appearance, that he could even sit at the table as a guest without being recognised by those who had known him. Certain it was that the mode of his entering and leaving the city was to all but himself a mystery. How or whence he came, and where or whither he went, none knew; and even they who were aware of his sojourn were unable fully to trace how they came by their knowledge. His name even was buried in a cloud of mystery. They who whispered of his whereabouts only alluded to him as the cabalistic doctor, or occult seer, whom no one talked of or acknowledged openly, but whom many knew, though without knowing his country, his race, or his name.

In one of the higher apartments of a once stately, but now nearly deserted and half-ruinous mansion, in one of the older and remoter quarters of the city of Venice, sat this singular personage. It was now verging towards midnight. The high but not very spacious room which he occupied was lighted by a single but bright lamp, which was suspended by a massive chain from the ceiling. Before the antique high-backed chair on which he sat was a dark oaken table, quaintly carved, but black with age; narrow, but of considerable length, and covered with implements and books apparently connected with pharmacy and chirurgery. There were numerous phials of different sizes, some nearly empty, some containing liquids of various colours. Jars of earthenware and of glass; alembics of the same material, with an apparatus for distillation; a tall glass vessel containing mercury; scales, and weights apparently as low as the fraction of a grain; a glass mask; a spirit-lamp of antique workmanship, and several metallic vessels, some of copper, and some of a metal resembling tin or silver. The books seemed to be mostly of vellum, and clasped with brazen clasps. There were likewise one or two rolls of strong parchment, written in a strong and bold character.

Beside this table, a few antique carved chairs formed the furniture of the apartment, the floor of which was covered with thick matting, as if to prevent any foot-fall being heard. At one end of the room was a stove, also of very old workmanship; the thick walls were covered with wooden panels, upon which had been painted a series of battles, by sea and land, apparently between the Venetians and Ottomans, now almost obliterated by time, dust, and smoke. The doors by which the apartment was entered were double and very massive, and the whole had a dreary, prison-like air, of the most chilling and depressing character, to him who saw it for the first time.

Opposite to the doctor sat a man who had entered a few minutes before. He was enveloped in a long cloak, which concealed his person, but his coarse black hair, tinged here and there with grey; his bloated features, and furtive yet

disgustingly bold and licentious eye, and the brilliant rings which sparkled upon more than one of his fingers, bespoke the Senator Bembo, who in a low tone was conversing with the seer upon some subject which to him seemed to be of deep interest.

"You are not, learned sir, unaware of the wealth, influence, and singular talents of the lady to whom I allude," said the Senator; "of her services on many occasions to the Republic, and of the estimation in which she is justly held by the signory."

"Thou alludest to the Countess Luchesini," said the doctor: "dost thou not?"

"I do," said the senator; "and to you, to whom so much is known" (the seer here made a gesture of dissent), "the suppressed astonishment cannot be unknown which pervaded every circle in which that illustrious lady ever moved, upon the strange rumour of an infatuated passion for a stripling adventurer, of foreign origin, and of a nation whose native insolence is only equalled by their love of wealth, heightened by their small scruples as to the means by which it is to be acquired."

"It may be so," replied the seer; "but why should this noble lady, who is, I ween, her own mistress, be accountable on such a subject to thee or to me?"

"You misconceive me, doctor," interrupted the senator. "I did not mean to say, though after all there need be no hesitation in thinking, that, beautiful and accomplished as she no doubt is, that noble and illustrious lady is hardly a fitting mate for a boy-adventurer."

"So it seems to thee," remarked the seer.

"So it seems to all," rejoined the senator. "But if this strange rumour created wonder, think you that wonder was not increased by the mystery amid which that rumour died, to be succeeded by its opposite, of a still stranger nature, and calculated to jeopardise the arrangements and compromise the welfare of some of the noblest in Venice?"

"Thou sayest it is so," was the answer of the seer. "Yet the question still remains, Why should it be so?"

"Because," answered Bembo, "that supposition involves other suppositions utterly incompatible with the welfare, the peace, and the alliances of some of the noblest families of the Republic. In itself the mystery were perhaps hardly worth much cost of solution; as connected with other circumstances it may be worth half a dukedom."

"As thou sayest it is thus, so do I believe," answered the cabalist; "but still, what is it to me?"

"It may be much," was the reply of the senator; "but upon yourself that must of course partly depend. There are more than one difficulty to be solved, and to your science, learned doctor, that solution may have to be due."

The seer fixed a keen gaze upon the visage of Bembo from beneath a pair of bushy eyebrows, which overshadowed, but could not quench the peculiar sparkle of a dark yet fiery eye.

"Before I work, signor, I must know how and where, and for whom and for what, I am to work."

"That is only equitable and reasonable," rejoined the senator. "It is a preliminary, in short, which common sense ratifies."

The cabalist nodded assent, but spoke not.

"I will only make bold so far as to observe," added the senator, "that the mode of conducting this business must, when it shall be fully explained, depend mainly upon your own better judgment."

"Thou sayest truly," replied the seer; "but go on."

"I shall do so," rejoined the senator; "and in the first place allow me to remark, that the first problem to be solved is that relative to the breach of understood engagements between an illustrious lady and one much her junior, which, both in their beginning and end, were the cause of much wonder and some speculation here in Venice. It is wished to ascertain if possible to whom that so mysterious breach is to be attributed, and also if possible its real, not ostensible, cause or causes. You understand me?"

The cabalist made a sign of assent.

"This precision, learned sir, is necessary," remarked

Bembo, observing as he thought some impatience in the countenance or manner of his auditor, "inasmuch as, if it be attributable to one only, and that one the party whom appearances at first seemed to indicate, the conclusions to be drawn are of less consequence and of less range of effect. On the opposite supposition the situation becomes more grave, because more are, peradventure, affected by it."

"Thou tellest me," said the seer, "that fewer or more are to be affected by this or that; but thou hast not told me *who* are to be affected by this or that."

"I have not," answered the senator, struggling to suppress a rising impatience of this indirect method of interrogatory; "but if it may be deemed sufficient for the moment, I may say that I shall myself, under any supposition, be affected. That is, however, of minor import. The vital questions to be solved are, whether personages of infinitely more importance to the state than I can pretend to be may not be affected, and deeply so, under the second supposition; and, last of all, if so, the means of prevention."

The seer knit his brows, and remained silent for a few moments.

"The solution of the first category," at length he said, with something like a suppressed and bitter smile momentarily lighting up his countenance, "may not be of difficult attainment, peradventure; for the solution of the second," he continued, "time and means will be required, and both may require thought. As for prevention," and here the seer fixed his dark and dangerous eye again upon the countenance of the senator, "that must depend mainly, as to its mode and manner, upon the urgency of the case and the necessity of circumstances."

The last words were spoken in a low and peculiar tone, which would have made the flesh of an ordinary auditor creep.

Not such an auditor, however, was the Senator Bembo.

"Methought you were about to add the conscience of the employer," said the senator, with an affectation of jocularly evidently assumed.

"God forbid that I should pretend to gauge the conscience

of a Venetian Magnifico," retorted the cabalist; "though I have been told there is nothing in Venice that may not be bought and sold."

"They who say so are probably no exception to their own rule," rejoined Bembo coolly. "All that I have to add is, that for that which I am ready to buy I am ready to pay. Say only that you can get me the information, and means, if by that word money be meant, shall not be wanting. Only this must be part of the bargain, that the inquiry must be set about without delay."

"The delay, if any, shall not be mine, signor," replied the cabalist. "Thou knowest what is wanting; let it be supplied, and the rest follows."

"Before that is done, let us understand each other fully," remarked Bembo, drawing as he spoke a clasped pocket-book from his bosom. The cabalist nodded assent, with a marked expression of eye fully appreciated by his companion, but said nothing.

"The first condition is secrecy, complete and impenetrable," said the senator.

"The best warrant for that," said the doctor, casting his eye as he spoke upon a box which seemed to contain various phials and preparations of drugs, "is, that my safety rests upon the same bond as thine."

At these words the visage of Bembo became somewhat pale. Recovering his composure however, immediately, he proceeded:

"The next is, that the service to be done shall be subject to no exceptions as to the mode resorted to. It must be done, however done."

"Thou hast not heard me make any exceptions," was the observation of the cabalist. "When made it is time enough to talk of them."

"Thou sayest well, doctor, and I am satisfied," replied the senator, in a low tone, unclasping his pocket-book. "Thou knowest, and therefore I need not tell thee what that document means." As Bembo said this he handed over a paper, to which was attached a large seal

"It is a bond of the Republic of Venice, for an instalment of money advanced for the service of the Republic by the magnifico and one of the Council of Ten, the most noble the Marquis Spinelli," said the cabalist.

"Is it not sufficient?" asked the senator, smiling somewhat as he put the question.

"It is sufficient," said the sage gravely; and leisurely unlocking a casket strongly bound with brass which stood near him, he was proceeding to deposit in it the bond handed to him by the senator. In doing this, however, he by accident took from the casket and laid upon the table an adorned miniature, which, from its peculiarity, attracted the eye of the Senator Bembo. It was that miniature of the beautiful Countess Luchesini which had been so strangely lost and found by the young Raymond Delaney, and as strangely requested as a gift by the old man who conveyed him, when insensible, after the wreck of his boat, into the retreat at the Carthusian convent.

Immediately on recognising it, and in such custody, the senator visibly started, as from a sudden mixture of surprise and alarm, and became as pale as ashes. It was in vain that he endeavoured, by looking aside, and seeming to withdraw attention from the cause of his terror, to conceal the tremor which agitated his whole frame. It was too manifest to escape the glance of the dark and fiery eye which at that moment confronted him; and became doubly apparent under the fierce and searching gaze with which the cabalist, immediately on discovering his agitation and its cause, regarded him.

"Thou knowest that bauble then, dost thou?" exclaimed the cabalist, his whole visage convulsed in sudden fury to a degree that seemed wholly irresistible, and seizing Bembo by the throat, ere the terrified and trembling senator could utter a word, he sprang over the table with an agility perfectly astounding, and bearing the affrighted magnifico to the ground before he had time to utter more than an inarticulate yell of despair, drew from his girdle a short and crooked Moorish crease or Malay dagger, which he held to the throat

of his opponent. At this critical moment the door of the apartment was burst open, and a man in the garb of a courier, as worn by the equestrian retinue of noblemen of high rank and dignity, interposed between the cabalist and his prostrate opponent, who lay gasping and speechless in alarm and mortal fear.

"Madman!" exclaimed the interposer, grappling with the cabalist, and bearing him in turn back against the table, "know you what you do, or who it is that you outrage thus?"

The mysterious seer with a sudden twist disengaged himself from the grasp of his new opponent, and stepping between him and the door, replied with a bitter calmness,—

"Were it the doge himself, it matters not! Talkest thou of 'outrage?' Let him pay for *his* before he prates of mine!"

"I will answer, sir, for the innocence of my friend," exclaimed the other, assisting Bembo, who had now recovered recollection, to arise from the floor; "I will answer for my friend's innocence. 'Tis some mistake!"

"The Marquis Spinelli," rejoined the cabalist, with a bitter smile, "the friend of ravishers and assassins!"

Struck dumb by this unexpected recognition, the marquis, for Spinelli it was, stood silent and abashed for a moment. He speedily, however, recovered himself.

"How you come to know me, sir," at length he answered, "I shall not ask you to explain. But as the Marquis Spinelli, I will pledge my honour that this gentleman is innocent, and that his accuser is in error."

The cabalist smiled another bitter smile. "Let him tell me how he knows this picture," replied he to this appeal of the disguised marquis, pointing to the miniature.

"My friend, I am sure, will find no difficulty in answering that," was the reply of the marquis, anxious to gain time until Bembo should become collected.

"Certainly not," interposed Bembo, who now saw he had the means of escape. "Certainly not. I am asked how I know that picture?"

The cabalist made a stern sign of assent.

"I know it then," answered the senator, assuming a perfect calmness and candid innocence of manner, "by seeing it in the possession of the unworthy person for whom, I fear, it was painted."

The seer in his turn appeared somewhat surprised at this rejoinder.

"For whom was it painted?" he asked sternly; though apparently somewhat puzzled by the unexpected coolness of the senator.

"That the bauble itself will show," replied Bembo, quietly, and now fully aware of his advantage.

"Indeed!" said the cabalist, now visibly puzzled. "How so?"

"That I shall soon explain," said Bembo, "if the bauble may be intrusted to my hand for one moment. If this keepsake, for such I take it to have been, be connected with outrage, as it certainly is with perfidy, the author of both may soon be pointed out;" and, as Bembo spoke, he took the miniature from the hand of the amazed cabalist, and touching a secret spring, opened the back of the picture and disclosed the portrait of Raymond Delancy!

"There sir," said he, with an air of candour and ill-repressed triumph. "After this you need not be at any loss, I should suppose, as to the person who must explain a matter which I, of course, do not profess to understand."

The seer stood baffled and amazed.

"Signor," at length he said sternly, sheathing the weapon he had drawn, "I beg your pardon."

"I also beg that of your excellency," he added, turning to Spinelli. "This discovery will not tend to make me do your bidding more slowly."

"All the return we ask for this unpleasant *embroglio* and not less singular *éclaircissement* is, that it be set about instantly," said the marquis.

"We are not, my lord, exactly the choosers of our own times," answered the seer, in a hollow tone. "There are other influences to be consulted; other powers to be conciliated, that cannot, and will not, be passed by."

“And, as he uttered these words, he drew back a panel in the wall, under which was concealed the entrance to a smaller apartment, which appeared to be lighted up by some brilliant yet mild effulgence, artificially produced, and which threw a quiet radiance over the first apartment where stood Bembo, Spinelli, and the seer.

The smaller apartment seemed to be nearly filled by a huge sphere, made of some pellucid glassy substance, which was brilliantly lighted from within, though how, it was not easy to say. Around the sphere were depicted, in clear and resplendent colours, the Zodiacal signs; on the sphere were shown the principal constellations; and through it, from beneath, by some wonderful contrivance, seemed to shine the planetary bodies and their satellites, in which might be detected, by an accurate observer, a slow motion.

Taking a silver wand in one hand and in the other a kalendar, the seer was about to commence to note the places of the several planets, for the day and hour, when, on a sudden, the great clock of the tower of St. Mark was heard slowly and distantly striking the hour of midnight. On hearing the first toll of the clock, the seer became motionless. The second and third followed. He gazed with intense anxiety on the celestial sphere; for when the fourth struck, a change of hue in the light became visible. It had become manifestly more red in colour and opaque in volume. Five—six—seven—eight: as the hue of the light became redder and more obscure, the seer's agitation became intense. He evidently became unable to keep down the alarm which affected his whole frame; and when the last toll of the distant bell struck the hour of midnight, the tremor that pervaded his entire body seemed to be almost spasmodic, and the kalendar and silver wand dropped from his powerless hands; for at that moment the sphere had become of a deep red, and cast a lurid and bloody glare into the room whence the seer and his astonished companions watched its changes.

“What means this strange display?” at last asked the disguised marquis, taking courage and addressing the seer, who, for the moment, seemed almost paralyzed.

At first, the cabalist gasped in vain for utterance; but at length, making a strong effort, effected an answer to his lordly interrogator, though in a voice hollow with agitation.

"Ask me no word more," he said, "I tell you the hour is fatal:—Come to-morrow—come any time, when the hour hath passed; but now, at your peril, venture not a single breath, for the flight of every minute hath death and ruin on its wings! Go!—Begone!—at once!" and grasping with a spasmodic clutch the handle of his dagger, he wildly and sternly motioned his astonished visitors from the apartment, the scene of an interview so strange.

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A few minutes before midnight, just at the moment when this extraordinary scene was enacted in that mysterious and desolate mansion, under circumstances so strange, a light caïque was silently rowed to the wave-worn stair leading up to the quay with its ruinous parapet-wall, on which stood the unoccupied wing of the Palace Luchesini. The skiff contained four persons—the slave who guided it, two females, and a cavalier, all of whom were screened from observation by dominoes or long cloaks, at that period a common costume in Venice. The night, although the moon had far declined from the full, was dark and thickly overcast. Not a star was visible. A dense fog drove in, at intervals, from the Adriatic; sometimes enwrapping all in thick gloom, through which the lights of the city were scarcely seen, sometimes clearing a little; and the breeze, which blew fitful and unsteady, sometimes brought over the waters a low moan, and sometimes that more hollow and mournful wailing whistle which is indicative of tempest.

The whole of the deserted wing of the Luchesini Palace was, of course, buried in almost profound darkness, for no light was visible within it, and around it the mists of night hung heavy, the waning moon just affording light enough to allow the building to be discerned.

Immediately on the skiff touching the ruinous stair, the cavalier leapt lightly on shore, handing out his female companions, with one of whom clinging fearfully to his arm, and

the other following close behind, he cautiously and noiselessly made his way round an angle of the building ; whilst the slave, left in charge of the skiff, bringing his boat close under the shadow of the wall, reclined in it, covered with a cloak, so as best to elude all observation.

In the meantime, the cavalier and his two companions, having turned the angle of the deserted wing, entered a low door, and began cautiously to descend a flight of narrow stone steps. The place and the circumstances might have daunted the stoutest heart. It was utterly dark. Not a ray of light guided them on their path. A damp coldness pervaded the vaulted passage, and the walls and stairs, as the party cautiously descended, seemed to the touch to be covered with mildew and the moist exhalations of a vault long since dis-used. It was difficult, under such circumstances, to banish from the mind an apprehension that they might be betrayed into this place for some dark and vindictive purpose ; and once or twice the younger female, who clung with an almost convulsive grasp to the arm of the cavalier, was on the point of fainting, when at length, after what seemed a long suspense, a ray of light greeted them, which was given by a dim lamp which stood on the dank floor, close by a huge but low door of massive construction. At this door the cavalier lightly tapped. A heavy bolt was slowly withdrawn, and the party found themselves in the presence of Father Momoro, who, laying his finger upon his lip, whispered to the cavalier the significant word “memento.”

The party, following the confessor in silence, now found themselves in the midst of a small ancient chapel. Its dimensions could only be imperfectly seen, as no lights were visible but two candles on the altar, and a lamp which dimly illumined what seemed to be a confessional at one side of the chapel. The confessor, preceding them, went forward to the eastern end where the lights were placed ; and Raymond Delancy and the trembling Validè, with her almost equally agitated attendant, for such was the party, stood before the altar.

As Raymond approached the light with his bride, he was startled by what seemed to him to be a deep convulsive sigh,

uttered by some one at some small distance. Recollecting, however, his promise to the confessor, he made no remark, nor showed any sign of having heard the sound, save by glancing momentarily towards the side of the building whence the sound seemed to come. The priest did not appear to notice it at all, though he, too, seemed somewhat impressed by the strange solemnity of the scene. He hurriedly performed the ceremony prescribed by the Church, in a low and agitated tone, and a few brief minutes sufficed to complete that tie which was so strangely destined to put a seal upon the fates of Raymond Delancy and his young and almost fainting bride.

The rite being ended, the confessor with a significant motion preceded, without loss of time, the newly-wedded pair to the door of the chapel, which they had just reached, when Raymond starting, suddenly turned round alarmed, as he distinctly heard what seemed to be a female voice utter that half-suffocated sound of a suppressed but involuntary scream, which is indicative of extreme mental anguish lapsing into insensibility. As Raymond instinctively turned half round in amazement, the priest hastily seized his arm, and looking him sternly in the face, again uttered the word "memento," conducted him and his bride through the entrance of the chapel, and left them there; returning himself, and bolting the heavy door after them. Crossing the floor with rapid step, he reached the dimly-lighted confessional, where lay the Princess di Santa Croce, reclined against the wall, her features convulsed, and cold and rigid as death; whilst the aged cardinal, shaking like an aspen and bathing her face with his tears, was tremblingly attempting to apply some restorative. In the meantime Raymond Delancy, making the best of his way to the open air, stood upon the broken steps beneath which his caïque was moored. There he passionately imprinted upon the lips of his young wife the first and last kiss she was ever, as his bride, to receive from him; and cautiously making his way round to the opposite side of the islet on which the Palace Luchesini stood, threw himself into a gondola which awaited him there.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

TREACHERY AND RETRIBUTION.

WHEN the sun arose, in red distemperature, on the morning which succeeded this eventful night, the unhappy Esperance almost dreaded the faint ray of the approach of dawn. In that apartment with the recess, the scene of so much mystery, she sat trembling and pale as marble. With that power of presentiment and instinctive dread, which sometimes enables us to shape out the shadow of a coming destiny, she felt that some crisis was impending in which her happiness or misery was deeply implicated. She had been questioned, and in a way never known before, by that mysterious old man, whom she was accustomed to consider rather as her absolute governor, or the presiding genius of her fortunes, than as her father. That spell she had broken; and hardly had that been accomplished before she was given to feel that her fortunes were at sea without rudder or compass, and some black tempest drawing round her, of the direction of which she knew nothing. She knew enough, however, to guess, and shudder at the apprehension, that the stranger youth with whom her fate was now knit was implicated in whatever was to happen. She had been questioned—whilst the compressed lip, knitted brows, and dark, fiery eye of the questioner, showed how strongly passion was raging within him—as to the outrage and rescue on that deserted quay, in the most desolate quarter of Venice, until memory and utterance itself sank under mortal fear, and the indistinctness of her answers aggravated the mischief, as to which her apprehensions became hourly more and more agonizing.

Nor was that instinctive misgiving, which so often anticipates an evil destiny, deceptive. He who questioned, in fact, writhed under the vindictive torture of a nature which, accustomed through life to circumvent others, now fancied itself to have been, for once, circumvented, and by a raw youth whom in matters of policy he would have treated as a child. By this, to him, irritating accident, that mask of

almost omniscient infallibility which he would have worn in the presence of Spinelli and the Senator Bembo, had been in a moment torn from his face, and the mysterious penetration of the cabalist proved to be at fault, even in that which seemed deeply to concern himself. Safety and revenge both counselled that the mischief done should be instantly repaired, that the sense of obligation might succeed that of a possible distrust. He was now aware of the object of their fear and of their hate; and he knew his victim. The die was cast.

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Upon a divan, in that mysterious apartment, sat the young and virgin wife, more like a beautiful statue than like one living. Pale as death and with ashen lips she sat, as stupified with apprehension. Tears refused to flow. Could she have wept, weeping might peradventure have been some relief. But the mortal feeling of the peril impending was too deep for tears. Motionless, like some beauteous petrification which had taken by chance the human form, she sat frozen with fear, life being alone exhibited in her lifeless features by a slight tremulous motion of the eyelids, seen only in those whose sensibility is extreme, and whose intellectual temperament is morbidly delicate, as well as exquisitely keen.

As she sat motionless, almost like one in a catalepsy, her eyes were intently fixed upon the recess, the curtains of which were drawn, and hung in rich folds on each side. Upon the altar again was seen to burn that silver tongue of flame, and before it on a sort of tripod lay two very small rolls of parchment or fine vellum, upon two wrappers of silk, as ready to be sealed up therein. To the agonized girl these two packets seemed an object of intense interest. They were exactly alike in size, and the silken wrappers destined for each were the same in hue and general appearance. To the terror-frozen girl, the meaning of the two packets was thus far well known. She was aware that one of them contained some communication, as she feared, of direful import. The other she knew to be a merely ostensible missive, to be made use of in case of obstruction or peril of any kind, but harmless in tenor and unimportant in tendency.

After long reflection, the painful suspense seemed too

much to be longer borne. Making an effort she rose from her seat, and staggering rather than walking to the tripod, she paused for a moment and listened, and then hastily reversing the position of the packets, glided back to her seat in a state almost of fainting from agitation. Nor did she, in the dizziness of her fear, perceive that, at the moment of the reversal of the two packets, the silvery tongue of flame that flickered on the altar momentarily became of a deep crimson, shedding a lurid though brief glare through the dim apartment. Had she perceived it, however, the omen would have been too late.

Hardly had she reclined her fainting form on an ottoman at the end of the apartment, when the old man entered, followed by that tall slave to whom his nod was a command, and who, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, and his arms crossed upon his breast, submissively awaited the behests of his master. Carefully wrapping the missives in their silken coverings, the old man carefully tied and sealed them; and then throwing some grains of incense upon the altar, reverently fumigated them, whilst repeating some invocation inwardly to himself, in the rich and odorous smoke which soon pervaded the entire apartment. Turning then to the tall slave who awaited his orders, he saw him conceal both packets in a receptacle contrived for that purpose amid the folds of his garments. This was followed by a long intercommunication carried on by means of signs, after which both left the apartment, without bestowing a glance upon the trembling girl, who, in a half-fainting state, had witnessed without interrupting this singular scene.

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The sun, which next morning dawned changefully and glitteringly upon the waves of the Adriatic, had not risen many degrees above the horizon, ere a whisper began to be tremblingly circulated round the palaces of Venice of the discovery of some dire treason against the state. It was rumoured that some arrests had been made during the night; and further, that the Council of Ten had been hastily and secretly summoned by the Doge, and had met privately at the signorv. As the day advanced, groups of citizens might

be remarked in the streets, on the quays, and upon the bridges, in earnest and agitated conversation. The wonted bustle of maritime city and crowded mart seemed to be suspended. It was observed that row-boats from the harbour, some apparently containing soldiers, and others apparently directed by the police-officials of the Republic, had made out to sea in the direction of that islet on which stood the old Carthusian convent, and that a communication with the arsenal seemed to be kept up at intervals. Gondolas were seen rowed hastily along the canals towards the ducal palace; and it was noticed that men who passed the Luchesini Palace gazed earnestly at its stately walls, and shook their heads, as if some mystery were connected with the pile.

Those who did so did not forebode in vain. Within the Palace Luchesini all was now consternation and dismay. The usual duties of the place seemed to be suspended. The domestics, whether high or low, with pallid faces, stood in groups and whispered together; whilst some few had, on the first alarm of mischief impending, stolen away, in panic fear of those tortures which the cruel jealousy and unsparing suspicion of the Venetian council did not hesitate to inflict upon the confidential servants of those whose fidelity to the aristocratic rulers of the maritime Republic was doubted. It was known to those who thus whispered, that their mistress, the beautiful countess, had been, soon after midnight, roused from sleep by the priest Momoro, her confessor, whose agitation could not be concealed. They had spent the greater part of an hour in the cabinet of the countess, and since then had not been seen. The conclusion of those who whispered of these events was, that the countess, fearing she might be implicated by some of the disclosures now making at the signory, had fled; and that the priest was also concealed. Such were the strange and distracted rumours now current amongst the panic-stricken domestics of the Luchesini Palace. They little knew what was passing within the very walls which they scarcely seemed to dare to trust with the sounds of their own words.

About two hours after midnight, on the night following that on which Raymond Delaney and his young bride had

been united by the confessor in that deserted and unknown subterraneous chapel of the Palace Luchesini, a dim light might have been observed to shed a timorous ray round the dark and lonely aisles of the sacred but now neglected edifice. It issued from a low and narrow door which, when open, disclosed a spiral stone staircase, inclosed within one of the thick and massive pillars which supported the low vaulted roof of the chapel, or rather crypt. The door itself was covered with rough stucco, and so managed as, when shut, to appear as a part of the masonry. From this doorway came, cautiously and silently, the confessor Momoro, bearing in one hand a lamp and in the other several keys of singular workmanship. He was followed by the countess Luchesini. She was pale as ashes, and seemed to carry with difficulty a heavy casket, which was apparently laden with valuables, and an antique portfolio, such as were used at that period for the safe custody of writings of value. The countenance of the priest showed marks of agitation; but as he lighted silently onward his beautiful companion, his face occasionally flushed; and from his small but keen eyes darted a fire that seemed the gleam of triumphant rather than the result of agitated feelings.

Crossing the damp pavement of the chapel with a silent step, the confessor and his companion reached a massive column at the farther end. A similar door which was opened by a secret spring showed another narrow and spiral stone stair, at the top of which the two companions were again stopped by a heavy door, of a somewhat larger size than the other concealed doors through which they had passed. It was composed of iron or some other metal; but was unlocked, apparently with ease, by means of a small and singular-looking key which the priest applied to the lock. The bolts flew back with a sharp jerk; and the two companions entered the apartment to which it led; the padre carefully concealing the lamp which he carried under his cloak.

After carefully reclosing and locking the door, which, massive as it was, turned noiselessly upon its hinges, the first care of the confessor was to examine a spot in the centre of the fantastically panelled room, which was of black oak,

richly and deeply carved, after the fashion of some former time. The particular aperture which drew his attention seemed nearly circular, and on being touched was found to contain a concealed speculum of slightly concave glass, by means of which the whole apartment might probably be reflected upon some plane mirror in some adjoining apartment. Carefully covering this with a slide concealed in the paneling, the priest set his lamp upon a table dimly shown in the midst of the room, upon which lay various parchments as well as instruments apparently astronomical, all antique and of singular workmanship. The rest of the apartment could only be imperfectly discerned by the faint light of the lamp; but at one end might be discerned a sort of alcove, shut in by rich curtains. At one side was something resembling an altar, on which stood what seemed a bronze lamp of antique workmanship; and above the fantastic antique open stove at the other side hung a portrait, now so obscure with dust as to be scarcely distinguishable.

As the countess, who had thrown herself upon a chair, looked anxiously round the strange and gloomy apartment, she suddenly grew paler than before, and a slight shudder, which she could not repress, ran through her frame.

"You seem to know this apartment, lady," said the priest, in a tone in which a slight shade of sarcastic significance was discernible.

The countess visibly started at the question (for such it was), and without reply turned a gaze in which alarm was mixed with some anger on the visage of her companion, whose eyes, fixed on her pale but beautiful countenance, burned with a strange and unusual fire.

"You do not answer, lady," said the confessor, without removing his gaze from the pallid face of the countess.

The countess recovered her almost lost self-possession with a strong effort. "I should first know, reverend father," said she, "why such a question is asked; for either its relevancy or propriety, at such an hour, I do not really recognize. If I find here an asylum," she continued, a slight shudder being perceptible as she uttered the words, "that is enough for me."

The priest paused for some moments, as in hesitation, ere he proceeded to reply : at last he continued:—

“That you may here find a safe asylum, dear lady, can be no matter for doubt: that is certain.” He again paused.

“But still,” he went on more hesitatingly, “that certainly must depend upon another; the conditions on which alone it can now be obtained.”

On hearing these words, the beautiful countess again visibly started and became of an ashy paleness. Recovering herself, however, she fixed a keen gaze on the flushed visage of the ecclesiastic, and repeated, as in surprise, the word “conditions!”

“Yea! conditions, lady,” rejoined the priest, with an assumed calmness that agreed ill with the raised expression of his features. “What is there monstrous in the word? Where so much is to be accorded, surely it cannot be unreasonable if something shall be yielded.”

The pale cheeks of the handsome countess glowed with a sudden but transient flush, which was succeeded by a pallor more like that of suppressed anger than that of grief or fear, whilst her white but compressed lips showed that insulted pride and wounded feelings were supplying a firmness which otherwise, perhaps, might have been wanting. Surprise now gave way to dignity; and drawing herself up, with that slight appearance of hauteur which she could assume at will, she replied firmly:—

“I do not profess to understand you, reverend sir; nor do I care to do so. What I would observe merely is, that I am not yet reduced so far as to have to bargain for safety with my own dependent.”

A sarcastic but momentary smile passed over the flushed countenance of the ecclesiastic as his companion uttered those words. It was, however, for a moment only; and was succeeded by a gaze rather of determination and triumph than of awe or deference. Nor was the tone in which he answered the proud remark of his beautiful companion much more deferential or delicate.

“When safety—ay safety, even for life itself—signora,” said he, “is the thing sought, he who accords that safety

ceases to be the dependent, whatever she may be," he continued, "who profits by it."

On hearing this insolent insinuation, the beautiful countess started up and stood erect, her eyes flashing with undisguised indignation.

"Then, reverend sir," she exclaimed, "I shall decline to negotiate even for safety upon such a basis. Innocence is well able to defend itself; nor need I fear enemies who, if they accuse at all, must accuse without proof, and ransack invention for facts which evidence has not to supply."

As she spoke, the countess seized the lamp and key, both of which were on the table, and turned to quit the place; when the priest, his visage red with passion and irritation, hastily interposed; his voice broken and husky with conflicting emotions, long concealed, but now bursting out into irrepressible heat and flame.

"This is mere madness, lady," he exclaimed, seizing the lamp and taking it from the hand of the petrified countess—"mere suicidal madness, I tell you! Would you rush on your fate—and what a fate! Know you not," he continued, "that he himself, the man of mystery, the impenetrable, the fathomless, the trackless Ludolfo, whom no cunning could ever trace, of whose whereabouts no one was ever sure, is himself arrested and in the power of the Council of Ten? and feel ye not that this is sure destruction to all who, knowingly or unknowingly, may be found to have been connected with him?"

Recovering her composure with a strong effort, the countess fixed her gaze, as if she would rend his soul, upon the agitated visage of the confessor, whose whole frame trembled with irrepressible passion.

"Be it so, reverend father," she said, with all the calmness she could assume. "It touches not me. You know, as well as I do, that every missive (and they were few) sent to that terrible and inscrutable man, was honourably returned, and by my own hands committed to the flames."

A sarcastic smile again flitted across the perturbed features of the confessor, as his radiant companion uttered these words.

"And thinkest thou, lady, that there were no duplicates of

these missives ; and that they cannot be produced ?” added the priest in a hoarse whisper. “Beware ! thou knowest not the toils that environ thee, nor the horrors that surround every step of thy path, if thou quittest this retreat.”

The countess again turned deadly pale, and would have fallen had she not clung to the table for support.

“Duplicates !” she faintly answered ; “you cannot mean it, father ! How—where—in whose possession ?”

“In his, dear lady,” rejoined the padre, soothingly, “who never means to use them, unless, indeed, he be compelled ; though God, in His mercy, avert a course so suicidal !”

“Profane not that hallowed name,” replied the countess in a faint voice ; “nor let it be breathed in the same breath with treachery and ingratitude !”

“Ingratitude !” re-echoed the confessor ; a momentary but bitter smile again passing across his inflamed visage. “If the great, perchance, sometimes confer favours, they at all events know well, it seems, how to value them ! Thinkest thou, lady, that it was for the payment of a smile and a soft word or two that I have risked so much ? Thinkest thou that for such guerdon as that I have imperilled my sacred character and that of the Church which I have sworn to serve ? That I have jeopardized liberty, nay life itself, by becoming cognizant of intrigues of which I could not but foresee the end ; and dared the vengeance of the jealous government of the Republic, which I knew at last must reach all connected with such practices, however cunning their precautions and deceptive their disguises ? Thinkest thou that I would thus implicate my fate with thine, countess, and for such guerdon as that ?”

“Implicate !” repeated the countess in an agitated whisper, as hardly knowing what she would say.

“Ay ! implicate,” continued the priest ; “is the word not germane to the circumstance ? Think you, Countess Luchesini, that you could stand to be interrogated before that terrible tribunal, and I escape being put to the same question ?”

The beautiful countess shuddered.

“If you tremble at the very sound, lady, how are you to face the reality of such a scene ? How, lady, are you to meet such

an ordeal ; and with the certainty that my salvation could, in such case, only eventuate in your own destruction ?”

The countess, on hearing these words, darted on the confessor a look so full of horror and loathing that the priest involuntarily recoiled before it for a few seconds. Recovering himself, however, he went on,—“This is no time, lady, I must repeat, for paltering ; and ’tis fit, for both our sakes, that you know it. I am either an agent or an accomplice ; take your choice—if choice there can be under such circumstances.”

The countess gasped for breath ; but by a strong effort stood still, with apparent composure.

“If I am an agent only, the unreasoning tool of others, as a tool I must answer my interrogator, whoever he may be ; and convince him that the hand which held the pen moved but as a machine that comprehends not the mind that guides it. Thus only could a charge of treason to the state be baffled ; and thus only, perhaps, evaded the dread ordeal of the rack and the scaffold—if, lady,” added the priest in a low voice, “the charge stopped there.”

“In the name of Him, without whom the best and the worst were equally lost creatures, what mean you, father ?” faltered the terror-stricken countess.

“Who knows,” continued the priest in the same hollow tone, “of what that inscrutable man may be accused ? That he hath exercised powers, which those like him can only derive from those greater powers of darkness with whom he is allied, you, lady, you best know how, are too well aware ; nor am I without cognizance of that awful knowledge ; although,” added the priest, “I know thou knowest it not ;” and as he spake these words the confessor turned his gaze for a moment towards the curtained alcove, which the dim light barely revealed. “I am aware,” he continued, “that thou couldst not perceive into whose ear thou whisperedst the unearthly confession of that mysterious and sad hour more than twenty years ago. God forbid !” he went on, in a low voice, “that I should ever need a dispensation from the Church’s head to absolve me from the sin of revealing it.”

On hearing these words, which only distantly but unmistakably alluded to a secret she deemed long buried in

oblivion, the countess seemed rigid with terror, and, hardly able to breathe, looked like one stricken with catalepsy.

The priest, seeing his advantage, eagerly pursued it.

"But God forbid, dearest lady," he went on,—“God forbid the possibility of such horrible anticipations being realized! No—No! dearest countess,” he continued, seizing her hand, “something tells me that it cannot be thus; and that if our fates be linked together, as assuredly they are, it is not for destruction, but for mutual confidence, for salvation, for future happiness;” and as he spoke, the eyes of the priest gleamed and sparkled with an unholy fire.

The beautiful countess, stunned and bewildered with conflicting emotions, vainly endeavoured either to speak or to release her hand from the impassioned grasp of the confessor.

“In this the crisis of our destiny, sweet lady,” he went on, “what is there to do but to yield to its necessity, which dictates that he who is to be less than enemy must be allowed to be something more than friend!”—and as he spoke, the priest, trembling with passion, attempted to encircle with his arm the round and taper waist of the almost fainting but still beautiful countess. The audacity of the act seemed at once to restore her to strength and collectedness.

“Wretch!” she exclaimed, and as she spoke the blood again for a moment or two crimsoned her pale cheeks; “I now understand you! But I am not, thank God! reduced so low in spirit as that. No! better come death—better come torture, than stoop to be the spoil of such a reptile as thou art.”

As she spoke, the countess with a violent effort disengaged herself from the grasp of the priest, and endeavoured to seize the key in order at once to quit the apartment and the hypocritical villain who had betrayed her there; but the padre, who had now completely unmasked himself, was become desperate, and felt that the moment was arrived when the schemes of years must either be frustrated or at all risks accomplished. Excited to a pitch of almost madness by contending passions, he again grasped his beautiful prey, exclaiming, “Then, if reason cannot prevail, force must.”

It was a struggle for more than life and death; for to the countess an infamous obscurity to be thus purchased was

worse than a death of torture, and her resolution was nerved accordingly. Feeling her strength sinking under a conflict so fearful, she suddenly drew a concealed stiletto, which for years she had been accustomed to wear, and, with the resolute hand of an outraged and indignant woman, buried it in the side of the confessor, who, giving vent to a curse, staggered, and immediately fell under the blow, deluging the floor, from which he in vain strove to rise, with his blood; and endeavouring without success to withdraw the weapon, which was buried too deeply in his side to yield to his agonized efforts: whilst the countess, trembling with insulted pride, fear, and agitation, seized the lamp and key, and, unlocking the door, passed into the passage beyond, leaving the key inside. Drawing to the door after her hastily, it, by means of a spring, was heard to lock itself; and the countess, rethreading the concealed avenues by which she had come, left the priest, weltering in his blood, to die, cut off from every chance of human aid, amidst the silence and darkness of that dread chamber.



CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HALL OF INQUISITION.

WITHIN not many days after this catastrophe commenced the last act of this so tragic drama, which, as it proceeded, became enveloped in deeper gloom and mystery,—a gloom that, like the cloud of night which shrouds so many dreadful deeds, only helped to cast a darker shade over the scene of blood and tears now destined to take place. In a somewhat long but low and gloomy room or hall of audience, which formed a portion of one of the state-prisons of the Republic, were to be seen seated the mysterious Ludolfo, strongly fettered and guarded by two of the Venetian *shirri* or police; and, at a little distance, the beautiful Validè, who seemed in an almost fainting state. At the other side of the hall, looking as if totally stunned and bewildered by his position, half sat, half reclined the young Raymond Delancy, but, alas! how

changed ! A premature old age seemed to have fallen upon him. His cheek was gaunt, his hair uncombed, and his eye bloodshot ; whilst upon his pale brow stood drops of perspiration, indicating the torture of anxiety and suspense under which he was suffering. Towards the nearly fainting Validè he scarcely seemed to dare to look ; and when the fettered Ludolfo gazed at him, the dark eye of the Italian exhibited a mixture of bitter contempt and suppressed anger, from which the unhappy young man seemed to shrink instinctively. Not so the dark-browed Italian. His broad and impassable forehead spoke sullen determination which nothing could shake. He already knew that his life was forfeited to the Republic, which, ever jealous of treason, never spared even a suspected traitor, unless innocence could be proved by the accused. But this was beyond even the art of the Italian ; and he was consequently well aware that his fate was sealed.

His bearing was, however, as stern as was his fate ; and it was only when he looked towards the unhappy girl, who was placed not far from him, that any ray of softness could be discerned to steal over his marble features.

The extremity of the gloomy apartment was crossed by an antique-looking balustrade or railing, composed of some dark wood, within which, on a raised dais or platform, sat those deputed by the council to try and sentence the prisoners if convicted, of which in Venice there could be little doubt.

The court consisted of five persons, of whom two were ecclesiastics, the aged Cardinal di Santa Croce presiding. At a table in front of them sat two clerks or secretaries, whose business it was minutely to record the entire proceedings ; and behind stood some officials dressed in black, and guards clad in embroidered coats of buff leather, and bearing in their hands a sort of partizan or battle-axe, of considerable length and size. Within the railing, on one side, dressed in black and her head covered with a veil, sat the Countess Luchesini. She looked pale and wan, but composed, and seemed to watch the entire proceedings with a quiet but painful anxiety. Her face exhibited visible traces already of deep suffering : much of that matured and voluptuous beauty, for which she was so remarkable, was now vanished,

and the deep lines of care and torturing recollections had now usurped the place of that dignified and truly womanly loveliness on which so justly she had prided herself.

After some consultation between the aged cardinal and his coadjutors on the judgment-seat, the fettered Ludolfo, together with the almost fainting girl Validè, was removed by the officials and placed within the railing, opposite his judges. Casting a momentary gaze towards the countess, to whom his presence was evidently painful, a shade of pity seemed to pass over his stern and unmoving visage, which, however, immediately recovered its dark and somewhat haughty character, as he eyed the judges upon whom his fate now depended, and with whom it rested to sentence him to a short and merciful, or to a cruel and lingering death. Of a treasonable plot against the Republic he had been already found guilty. But of the additional crime of sorcery,—a charge easily believed and on the slightest grounds at that era,—he was also accused: and as to this last accusation, evidence was now to be adduced.

On the charge being read to him, and on his being asked what he had to say, he replied with a contemptuous smile, “I have nothing to say to such a charge!”

“Are the court to take that, prisoner, for a declaration of your guilt, or of your innocence?” asked the cardinal, after a pause.

“As the court may please,” was the stern answer of the Italian.

“The court does not interpret against you. The evidence shall be heard, and upon that will the court decide,” said the cardinal, after brief consultation with his colleagues.

The prisoner merely bowed a haughty acquiescence.

To detail at length the evidence, such as it was, adduced before a tribunal of judges who had already made up their minds to condemn the extraordinary being who now stood fettered before them, would be useless. It was principally extracted from the only female attendant found in that mysterious den below the towers of the ancient Carthusian monastery, when the clue to that mystery was at length in the hands of the state officials of Venice. It amounted to

that description of testimony upon which convictions of the crime of magic, and of dealing with the powers of darkness, have in all ages mostly rested. Proof was given of various manuscripts in different languages having been found in that mysterious retreat: some of which, in the Persian and Sanscrit tongues, were believed to treat of incantations used by the Brahmins of India, and the Persian followers of Zoroaster in Hindostan as well as Persia proper. It was urged that the prisoner had erected an altar, connected with which no Christian symbol was to be found. That he only quitted his seclusion at certain times or phases of the moon, and that, prior to such enterprises, certain ceremonies were performed by him, at which the young female Validè, or Esperance, was present, and aided and assisted. That he possessed an ancient portrait, for which he exhibited great reverence and paid divine honours, supposed to be that of Mani, or Manes, the founder of the pestilent and devilish Manichæan heresy. And, lastly, it was deposed that in the prisoner's secluded retreat were found an ancient scroll, purporting to be the original gospel of St. Matthew, as first written in the Hebrew tongue and character; a writing unknown to the Church; and a list of the canonical scriptures, from which were omitted the Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and the prophet Daniel, all portions of the canon of the Old Testament, and in which is mentioned the Book of Jasher, a writing not recognised by the Church, and from which were also absent the Gospel and Revelation of St. John the Evangelist, and the last Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews, all portions of the canon of the New Testament.

Such was the *vivâ voce* testimony against the prisoner, much of which was extorted by the dread of a resort to the rack. When it was brought to a conclusion, another witness was ushered before the judges. He was an old man of somewhat short stature and slightly built, with that stoop and roundness of the shoulders which much writing sometimes occasions with persons beyond the middle age. His dark complexion singularly contrasted with his grey peaked beard, bushy eyebrows, and thin, grey, closely cut locks. He was dressed in black; his cloak being of a sort of coarse

camlet; and instead of the laced ruffs then commonly worn, he had something resembling that which has been called a Geneva band; a costume sometimes affected by persons who wished to pass for students of law, medicine, or theology. On facing the judgment-seat, he made a low and deferential obeisance to the aged cardinal and his coadjutors, and handed in a written parchment-roll of some length.

Having looked through the contents of the document, the cardinal proceeded with his interrogatories.

"What is your name?" he first demanded of the witness.

"Juan Ronquillo."

"Of what country?"

"A Castilian Spaniard," was the reply.

"Of what profession are you?"

"I am a scrivener and notary."

"Do you swear this signature to be your handwriting?"

"I do," responded the witness, taking in his hand a beautifully illuminated MS. copy of the Gospel engrossed on vellum, which lay on the table before him.

"This parchment," continued the cardinal, "purports to be the dying statement of Esperance, Baroness Delancy, a noble English lady." The witness bowed assent.

"When did her demise take place?"

"This is the third day since her death," answered the notary.

"Of what disease did she die?" asked the cardinal.

"Your eminence will find a certificate of testimony, signed by the attendant physicians, and specifying the nature of the malady, appended to the deposition of the deceased lady," responded the notary.

The certificate set forth that Esperance, Baroness Delancy, a noble English lady, wife of the Baron Delancy, recently in the service of the Republic of Venice, died on the day named, in consequence of nervous epileptic fever, brought on, as deponents suppose, by distraction, terror, and grief of mind, arising from the sudden arrest of her husband and son, accused of being privy to a plot against the state.

The document was signed by the two attendant physicians, and witnessed by the notary who drew it up.

"Are you prepared, witness, to avouch, on your oath, that the statement put in by you as that of the deceased Baroness Delancy is truly and correctly taken down as uttered?"

"I swear that, to the best of my belief, it is so," answered the old man, solemnly; again laying his hand upon the sacred roll of vellum before him.

"Did the baroness know, for certain, that she was dying?" was the next question of the cardinal president of the court.

"Unquestionably she was aware of her state," was the response.

"How know you that she was so aware?" asked the interrogator.

"Because she had received the sacrament of extreme unction," was the reply of the witness.

The written deposition was then read. It set forth that it was the deposition of Esperance, Baroness Delancy, wife of the Baron Delancy, an English nobleman, lately in the service of the Republic of Venice. That the deponent, as well as her consort, professed the Catholic faith. That the deponent, then and at the time of making this statement, knew herself to be *in extremis*, without possibility of recovery, and had received the last rites of the Church. That the deponent, being then aware of her condition, and on the eve of departing this life, declared that from twenty-one to twenty-three years ago, there resided in her late father's household, in the capacity of tutor, an Italian, or one so describing himself, called and calling himself Antonio, *alias* Antonio Valdes: and that the said Antonio Valdes acted as tutor to the deponent. That the said Antonio, otherwise Antonio Valdes, suddenly disappeared, in consequence of advances made by him towards deponent, her resistance to which he knew would involve most serious consequences to himself: and that she has never seen him since, until confronted with him since his arrest.

The document then set forth that the ecclesiastics and officials in attendance observing the deceased lady to become, at this part of her deposition, more agitated than before, pressed her upon this point, explaining to her the danger to which she exposed her salvation if she concealed aught

relating to this man; when the deponent, after much hesitation, avowed that her belief was that she had seen him once after that disappearance, but under circumstances at once so mysterious, extraordinary, and horrible, that she verily believes that she was at that time under a delusion, and subjected in some way to the power of the enemy of mankind: and that she verily believes the person she then saw to be identical with the aforesaid Antonio, or Antonio Valdes, and with the person now under arrest under the name of Ludolfo, otherwise Ludolfo d'Alcantara, described as a Spaniard and licentiate of Salamanca.

The instrument finally concluded by setting forth that those in attendance were about to proceed to question the dying baroness as to the dates of these transactions, and more especially of that mystery so singularly alluded to, but were prevented by her being observed, after this communication, suddenly to become worse.

That being left to repose, in the hope that quiet or sleep might afford some temporary relief, she was at midnight attacked by a slight convulsion fit, followed by a violent shivering; after which she gradually sank into a comatose state, from which she never emerged until within a few minutes of her death.

"Have you anything to say, prisoner," asked the cardinal, when the deposition had been read, "why the document which you have now heard should not be admitted in evidence?"

"I have nothing to say," calmly answered Ludolfo.

"Then you admit, the court must presume," said the cardinal, "your former knowledge of the deceased Baroness Delancy, and of her family?"

"I admit it," replied the prisoner, unhesitatingly.

The countenance of the cardinal expressed undisguised surprise at this reply on the part of the accused; he, however, continued his cross-examination:—

"Do you, by this answer, mean to admit that, in the case referred to by the deposition *in articulo mortis* which you have just heard, you have exercised, with regard to the deceased lady, powers not human, but derived from the great enemy of God and man?"

A sardonic smile of indescribable contempt passed over the stern features and lofty brow of the accused on hearing this interrogation. He paused for a single moment before replying ; and then answered, with a calm dignity that somewhat surprised his judges,—

“What can I have uttered to cause it to be believed that I should admit anything so derogatory to the common sense of any man who has studied wisdom or revered truth?”

“It is for me to question, prisoner, and for you to answer,” rejoined the cardinal, who seemed somewhat discomposed by the nature of the reply. “Do you admit this, or do you not?”

“I do not,” firmly said the accused.

“Do you then deny that you have ever exercised such powers in the case of the deceased lady, whose deposition you have heard read?”

“I answer,” said Ludolfo, calmly, “that the powers I have exercised, in this and in many other cases, are only such as the great Creator has vouchsafed that minds which are wise and strong shall exercise over minds that are less wise and less strong!”

By the calm and possessed manner in which this answer was given, as well as by the nature of the reply itself, the cardinal-judge seemed for a few minutes baffled, and consulted with his coadjutors, apparently as to how to shape the questions that were to succeed, or else as to whether or not it might be advisable to proceed at all. At length he resumed—

“Prisoner,” said the cardinal-judge, “the court cannot receive this as an answer to the interrogatory put. It is deposed in evidence that powers have been exercised by you which we have no warrant for believing to be naturally possessed by any man ; powers which must, therefore, either have been derived from the miraculous gift, vouchsafed only to the saints of the mother of God or that of her divine Son,” and here the cardinal devoutly crossed himself, “or from wicked collusion with the powers of darkness and the enemy of God and man. From which of these sources do you profess them to have been derived?”

The sardonic smile of a moment again faintly gleamed across the countenance of the fettered Ludolfo. He paused for a second, and gazed steadily at his judges, and then replied in a firm and deliberate, though low tone,—

“If I am asked to give a definition fettered by distinctions to which I have not assented, my answer is, that I have no such definition to give. If the court desires such a definition it must be given by one who has acknowledged the distinctions, and not by one who ignores them, not as abstractly untrue, but as inapplicable to his case.”

“Is the court, prisoner, to take this as your final answer?” demanded the cardinal.

“It is such answer as I can give to such an interrogatory,” was the calm reply.

The cardinal again consulted with his judicial colleagues for a few moments, and then turning to the prisoner, said in a low tone, “No more questions, then, are necessary. Let all the prisoners be removed.”

The officials were proceeding to carry the order into execution, when they were stopped by a sign from the cardinal-judge, who directed them again to set Ludolfo, otherwise called Ludolfo d’Alcantra, and the female Validè, or Esperance, before the court.

“Prisoner,” said the cardinal, addressing the former, “there remains one question to which the court demands an answer, an explicit knowledge on this head being necessary for their properly estimating the guilt or innocence of the female accused. The evidence given speaks of her as your daughter. Do you profess to stand in the relation towards her of father?”

“If the court sees fit to infer such a relationship, I have nothing to object,” was the reply of the accused.

“That is not an answer, prisoner,” sternly rejoined the cardinal. “You are asked if you stand with regard to this young female in the relation of a father to a daughter. I demand, in behalf of the court, a definite reply.”

“If the court demands a definite reply to such an interrogatory,” retorted the accused, the characteristic bitter and sardonic smile corruscating for a moment across his features, “should not the court make such a demand in the quarter

whence a positive replication to such a question ought alone to be expected?"

"What mean you, sir?" was the surprised rejoinder of the aged cardinal, whom this answer took quite unawares.

"I mean," calmly rejoined Ludolfo, "that mothers commonly best answer such questions."

"You trifle with us, sir!" exclaimed the cardinal in bewildered astonishment. "Beware! or, if you persist in this course, inform, sir, the court where the mother is to be found."

The prisoner paused for a few moments, and then turning towards the side of the hall where sat the countess, he fixed upon her marble but still beautiful features a stern gaze.

"In this court is she peradventure to be found," he continued, "if the court address itself to yonder noble lady, the illustrious Countess Luchesini."

The utter astonishment which seized all present, on hearing this extraordinary avowal, may be more easily conceived than described. Upon the countess herself its effect was terrible. Her countenance became of an ashen paleness; drops of cold deathly perspiration stood upon her brow; the tremor which pervaded her frame was indescribably fearful; and gasping as for breath and utterance, she seemed ready to fall. At length, after a short pause, she seemed, by a desperate effort, to muster up a faint renewal of strength and resolution. Rising with difficulty from her seat, she crossed the room staggering until she reached the place where sat the pallid victim, who, already half fainting with terror and agitation, shrank from her grasp as fearing some new and terrible revelation. The unhappy countess, however, persevered. Turning back the short sleeve of the trembling girl, which barely, after the Turkish fashion, came below the shoulder, she at once found the sign for which she looked. Upon the fair skin of the beauteous Validè, just below the shoulder, was plainly to be seen, of a pale crimson tint, the figure of a tongue of flame rising as from an altar; on beholding which the unfortunate countess uttered a faint scream, and vainly attempting to articulate the words "my child," dropped upon the floor as one dead, and was conveyed from the room, to all

appearance lifeless, by the officials, who, used as they were to sights of terror and agony, were visibly affected by this sad scene.

As if touched at heart, and anxious to bring the dismal ordeal to an end, the aged cardinal now hastened, apparently, to cut the proceedings short. Having with his colleagues in judgment retired for a brief space to consult as to their verdict and sentence, the judges again took their seats, and the aged cardinal, evidently much moved, commenced to pass the sentence of the court upon the prisoners.

“Ludolfo d’Alcantara,” said he, “otherwise known as Antonio Valdes, the court has decided that you are guilty of treason against the Venetian Republic, its doge, and council. It is a crime which demands capital punishment, and is so punished by all nations, and it calls for such retribution in this instance more especially and loudly, inasmuch as had God, and our Lady, and St. Mark, the special protector of Venice, permitted your treason to have succeeded, it might have betrayed Christendom once more to the infidel, and endangered that faith with the arch-enemy of which you are leagued. The court also adjudges you guilty of heresy, blasphemy, and sorcery, upon the evidence adduced. These crimes all deserve death, and death in the worst form in which justice can inflict it. You are, therefore, Ludolfo d’Alcantara, adjudged and sentenced to suffer death by fire; and the final direction of this court is, that you be now remanded to prison until the fortieth day from this, when you, Ludolfo d’Alcantara, shall, as a heretic, a traitor, and a sorcerer, be burned to ashes, at noon, in the great square of St. Mark, and may you (if it be possible) in the interim be enabled to earn that mercy hereafter which cannot in this world be afforded you.

“You, Validè, otherwise Esperance d’Alcantara, the court finds guilty of heresy and sorcery also; but in consideration of your youth and your acting under the wicked tuition and control of a parent who is without a Saviour, the court mercifully affords you the opportunity of retrieving your errors by becoming a Christian neophyte, and dedicating yourself to God in such conventual establishment as may consent to

receive you. The sentence upon the other prisoners the court takes time to consider."

Having, in a voice that sometimes faltered with uncontrollable emotion, passed this dreadful sentence, the agitated and aged cardinal and his colleagues hastily withdrew, leaving the male prisoner, who heard the whole with an air of stern contempt, supporting his unhappy and fainting daughter as best he might with his fettered hands, until forcibly separated from her by the officials, some even of whom this sad and terrible scene had melted into tears.



CHAPTER XXV

THE AUTO DA FE.

WHEN the unfortunate Raymond Delancy was remanded to the gloomy cell in which he was now imprisoned, he was in a state resembling stupor. In short, the excessive grief, anxiety, and incertitude to which, on a sudden, he had been subjected, had, as is the case with nearly all but the very strongest minds, in a manner benumbed his faculties. Excitement of too excruciating a nature to be longer endured, had produced, by its rebound, a mental apathy; so that when the prisoner, worn out by conflicting emotions, threw himself upon the straw pallet which formed his only bed, he speedily dropped into a perturbed sleep which lasted many hours, and was not interrupted until the first rays of the morning stole faintly betwixt the thick bars which secured the little window of his cell. When at length he awoke, the events of the few preceding days appeared to the mind of the tortured Raymond less like an actual reality than some feverish and sickly dream. It was to him as one of those visions, of which the finish is more wildly confused than has been the earlier progress. Of the fate of the other accused he knew nothing. Having been removed by the officials before the recall by the judges of Ludolfo and the unhappy girl now his nominal wife, he was not in any way aware of the extraordinary scene which followed, nor of the awful sentence pronounced by the car-

dinal at its conclusion. From his jailers he could not learn anything. They were forbidden to converse with him ; and beyond conveying to him food and any indispensable necessities, which was done in silence, they had no intercourse with him. There he was, cut off from all communication with the world without, which was to him a total blank.

With all men, placed in a position so trying, under preceding circumstances so extraordinary and so appalling, the mind must necessarily turn back and prey upon itself. Such now was the case with the miserable young man, who was absolutely crushed under his calamities. Intimate as he was with the character of the ruling oligarchy of Venice, he could not but anticipate the worst for those accused ; and though conscious of his own entire innocence of the slightest design against the interests of the Republic or its ruling nobles, he knew too well their jealous, suspicious, and remorseless temper, to allow himself to hope that he could escape severe punishment. His connexion with the mysterious man, and the hitherto impervious retreat in the old Carthusian convent, he could not deny nor explain away ; and hence, as day followed day without throwing any light upon his probable fate, he began to conclude that the other victims had been disposed of in some secret manner (no uncommon fate for those suspected by the Council of Ten), and that possibly imprisonment for life in that dim dungeon, or a secret death, might be his own lot.

One small gleam of hope, however, he had, amidst all the darkness of his fate, yet in reserve. During the few minutes of free action that remained to him, between the knowledge of his terrible position and his actual seizure by the officials of the signory, he had delivered into the hands of a faithful servant the ring given him by the Princess di Santa Croce, when he parted with her on board his galley, after her rescue from the power of the Ottomans. To this servant he had intrusted the duty of conveying, if possible, the ring to the hands of the princess herself : and he knew that, if circumstances should render this practicable, it would be faithfully performed. To this faint hope, therefore, he steadily clung, slight as it was ; for supposing, as he might perhaps naturally

and not arrogantly do, that the accomplished princess took no common interest in his fate, it still remained highly doubtful whether or not she possessed the slightest power to mitigate that fate. When to this was added the extreme difficulty of getting the token conveyed, without exciting attention or suspicion, to the hands of her for whom it was intended, the chances of a favourable result seemed forlorn indeed. But the perishing catch at straws, and hope clings about us to the very verge of destruction; and so it was with the unhappy Raymond Delaney, in this his dark hour.

Yet is not Hope always a deceiver, as some have called her. Where the secret but treasured love of a noble-hearted woman is concerned, that hope, which to ordinary ken seems most slender, is often least delusive. It is so because the strength of female affection is never known till tried, even by her who owns it; and because, though, where the head must prompt the heart, expectation is ever disappointed, still, where the heart prompts the head, it is ever surpassed.

The desolate young man was now doomed to discover this truth, to learn at last that even to a dungeon like his, love can lend a ray of comfort; and that he who can command the heart-service of a devoted woman, however unworthy of her, should never despair.

Day after day,—day after day,—until weeks had elapsed, —rolled heavily and drearily on, and still the same cimmerian darkness was the lot of Delaney; and the tiny ray of hope which had hitherto helped to support his broken heart had begun to fade and wax deathly wan, when one day he fancied he discerned in the hard countenance of the keeper, whose office it was to supply his food, a trace of kindly meaning, which before he had never noticed. As the man placed before him his allotted ration, which consisted merely of a loaf of coarse bread, such as is used by the poorest of Italian peasants or fishermen, some salt fish plainly dressed, and a small pitcher of poor wine, he fancied the fellow put them down with an air of assumed cheerfulness which he took no pains to conceal, and, in fact, seemed to wish his prisoner to perceive. The result was in accordance with the appearances which had been noticed by the now almost despairing captive.

On breaking the coarse bread, he discovered it contained a small scroll, on which was written in his own English tongue, and in characters which were not unknown to him, the five significant words, "Your token is received.—Hope!" To say that the very sight of these characters did not cause a passing thrill of transport to glow for a moment through the bosom of the unfortunate prisoner, would be to violate truth. It was transient, however, and when past, the gloom of his situation seemed deeper than before. Shedding a few bitter tears over the writing, he carefully concealed it from view, and tried to await with patience whatever might be his fate, and whatever might be the issue of those exertions which he now knew would be made to ameliorate it.

Nor did he long remain without signs that the rigour of his captivity would, at all events, be somewhat abated. He had hitherto been confined closely to the dungeon in which he was immured. A relaxation of this rigid confinement was now silently vouchsafed; and he was allowed to take exercise during a few hours in the day, by pacing up and down a short corridor into which his cell opened, but which was secured by a strong door at one extremity. At the other was a flight of winding stone stairs, which seemed to lead up to the roof of his prison. These steps led to a landing-place of small size, where were two massive doors, strongly framed and locked. One precluded the prisoner from any further progress upwards towards the roof of his prison. The other seemed to lead to a cell. This landing-place was ventilated and lighted by a window of no great size, but at some height from the floor, and high enough to be out of the reach of any one destitute of all means of assisting him to climb the ten feet which was the height of the window from the floor. Thus, therefore, although the space allowed the solitary captive for exercise was somewhat enlarged, his solitude was rendered more galling even than before, by the contemplation of the light of heaven, so near him, yet still beyond his view.

To the natural wish to behold once more the sun and sky, Raymond added another motive for overcoming all obstacles if possible. Judging by the direction of the light at certain

hours, and by the sounds from without which occasionally reached his ear, the prisoner concluded that the window in question looked upon the grand square of St. Mark. If, therefore, he could obtain access to it by any means, it might give him the future power of communicating with persons below, a privilege invaluable to a person imprisoned under circumstances so extraordinary. To this enterprise he therefore now applied himself. On examining the window, he perceived that, owing to its height from the floor and from the square below, it was much less closely barred than the other windows of the prison. In fact, it was secured only by two strong iron bars, built into the stone of the window, between which a man might put his head. For the sake of light and ventilation, probably, the cross-bars had been omitted; so that could he once reach the window, his view without would be uninterrupted, and communication with the exterior easy. Ruminating upon this subject, and on the means in his power to accomplish his purpose, he recollected that in one side of the door of the cell, opening from the landing-place, was inserted in the wall an old staple, much rusted, which in former times had held the end of a cross bar of wood or iron. This he thought might help him to effect his purpose; and to find means to detach it from the massive stones, betwixt which it was firmly fixed, was his next quest. To achieve this he first devised an instrument.

Amongst the habiliments which he had been permitted to bring with him to his prison there was luckily a richly embroidered sword-belt of embossed leather, which was not uncommonly worn at that period, and which fastened with a large-sized buckle of chased and carved silver. Exerting all his force, he contrived to twist and at last to dis sever from its blue steel tongue the silver setting of the fastening. With the well-tempered steel points of this portion of the buckle he soon made an efficient tool to loosen the old staple from the stones between which it was embedded; and he at once saw that, if attached to anything able to bear his weight and hooked upon one of the bars of the window, he might, by its means, ascend to the station he contemplated. But to what was he to attach it? The coverings of his straw pallet

were too slight and too much worn to afford any hope of his using them for this purpose.

There was, however, the leather belt; and to manufacture a sort of cordage out of this was his next essay. This he at last managed to do by means of the sharp tongue of the buckle. By hard labour he divided the tough leather of the belt into stripes. These he spliced together by means of the strong silk thread which formed part of the embroidery; and the leathern cord thus formed, he, by a similar method, fixed firmly to the staple which he had obtained. By this means, a leathern rope ending in an iron hook was completed: and this, after many fruitless attempts, he at last, by the aid of a lath, which he wrenched from the bottom of his pallet-bed, succeeded in hooking round one of the bars of the window to which he desired to ascend. On trial it was found to bear his weight; and after hollowing by means of the tongue of his buckle two rests for his toes in the joints of the stones forming the wall, he without much more difficulty climbed to the window, and once more beheld the sky and sun, carefully avoiding all chance of being observed from below. As soon as the first feeling of satisfaction at his success had subsided, however, the prisoner began to reflect that the gain of this adventure was little or nothing. If discovered, it might add to the severity of his imprisonment; and how without discovery could he manage to communicate with any one, and with whom was he to communicate? To trust to a stranger any billet addressed to the Princess di Santa Croce might compromise her without benefit to himself. Was such a risk justifiable? Was he, from selfish motives, to endanger, however slightly, the comfort of a being so amiable, and one who had already risked something to alleviate his misfortunes? In these perplexing ruminations and arguments with himself the imprisoned Raymond spent some days without result. His indecision continued to be as complete as ever; and he could not determine nor resolve upon anything. This state of abeyance was, however, now to be terribly ended. The fatal hour of his life was come.

Shallow and unreflective scoffers may laugh at the assertion that, at times, "coming events cast their shadows

before ;" but the philosopher will pause before he follows the example. Certain it is that men of sensitive minds, foredoomed to misfortune, have felt the dark presentiment of their coming trial hang over them, like the slowly gathering and blackening gloom that is the dumb herald of the thunder-stroke ; and that even those near the man who is doomed have dim hints of an agony to come ; as they who were near Cromwell when the death-fever struck him, shudderingly felt a secret whisper, to which they dare not give breath, that the solemn end, celebrated by the elements, of their great master was at hand. And even thus was it with the hapless Raymond Delaney. Stunned with the terror of the dreadful and extraordinary scenes amidst which he had so suddenly been plunged, he had not attempted to keep any account of time ; and hence to him his captivity seemed much longer than it really had been. To his apprehension, even since the period when the precious billet of the princess reached him, a long and dreary interval seemed to have elapsed. Excepting the trifling change in the rigour of his detention, nothing had followed ; and a listless gloom again began to darken round the mind of the hapless captive, all whose hopes seemed only the precursors of disappointment. The weight as of some impending catastrophe again crushed down the naturally elastic spirit ; and the mind of the prisoner, benumbed as it were with melancholy, dreaded it knew not ~~where~~, and sank under it knew not what. Pressed down with sad thoughts, distracted by agonizing anxieties, and feverous with undefined apprehensions and forebodings, he had at length, one night, sunk into a heavy but disturbed sleep. Rest it could not be called, for it hardly amounted to a cessation of suffering. It consisted merely of a painful series of those wild unearthly and complicated dreams, by which men are tortured who steep their faculties in the delusive and destructive witcheries of opium, but which rarely haunt healthy minds, unless excited to feverish distraction and the reaction of exhausted sensibility by intense mental suffering and the corroding influence of anxiety and suspense too terrible to be borne. He felt himself, on a sudden, transported to some strange and distant clime, unknown by travellers and unheard of by geographers,

where all was grotesque, and all at the same time horrible: where the trees waved like the unwholesome upas: where the lurid sky seemed thick with pestilence; and where harsh, distorted, and swarthy faces, from amidst vestments of various disgusting dyes, forming the most hideous combinations, glared at him as they passed, first in surprise, then in fierceness, and then in loathing and fury. Again he was carried by a frenzied crowd, as if excited to madness by some dark and unhallowed rite, towards a huge and misshapen but gigantic pagoda, where crowds of black and hideous priests in white and yellow vestments seemed to be awaiting their victim. By another change, again, the roof of the immense and shadowy edifice seemed to fade into a lurid and storm-laden sky, to which the crowd below, stiffened into statues by fear, turned up staring and blood-shot eyes, whilst overhead legions of spirits were heard to rush past, as from some vast unearthly conflict, and with long-drawn hollow wailings and smothered screams, as though some enormous suffering were now impending over the universe, which no power could postpone, and before which the powers of darkness themselves fled aghast.

From these visions of a brain overladen by grief and horror, Raymond Delancy at length awoke; and as soon as his senses became sufficiently collected and clear to attend to external impressions, he became aware of a dull sound as of many voices without, mingled with other noises, indicating that something unusual was going on beyond the walls of the prison of which he was an inmate. Of what nature the scene might be which was now enacting, he of course could not ascertain. Sometimes the hoarse voices of an apparently excited populace were mingled with the heavy rumbling of some vehicle; whilst to this was sometimes added the hollow and profoundly resonant toll of the great bell of the church of St. Mark, which on occasions of extraordinary and deep solemnity only was allowed to startle the sea-girt city with its sad and ominous sound. As Raymond intently listened to these dim indications of some coming event, his anxiety became painfully intense, and his misgivings more and more dark and overwhelming.

It seemed to him, amidst his other bitter imaginings, that the time was passed when the door of his cell was usually unlocked; and from this he concluded that his imprisonment was again to be as severe as at first; and from this conclusion he drew others, shocking and horrible, until his agitation became so ungovernable, that he wrenched violently at the door of his dungeon, in the vain hope that it might not be secure. These doubts and fears, however, turned out to be illusory. About the usual hour, to his great relief, his jailor unbolted and unlocked the door, and set down such simple viands as were to be his fare for the morning; leaving the door of the cell, as usual, open to the corridor when he retired, which he did with more than usual haste. Nor could the prisoner, who watched his countenance with intense anxiety, help observing that he seemed to put on an air of indifference which he really did not feel, and which agreed ill with his hasty departure. Be that as it might, no sooner did the young man hear the door which closed the corridor locked and bolted, than he hastened up the winding stair to the landing-place where the window opened out upon the great square of St. Mark.

A few moments served to convince him that some extraordinary event was taking or about to take place. The hoarse buzz of an excited and dense crowd was there distinctly audible, which was drowned for a moment, at intervals, by the hollow and deep boom of the toll of the great bell of St. Mark. The agitation of the miserable young man now became excessive. A tremor, quite uncontrollable, pervaded his whole frame; and it was with great difficulty, and only after repeated attempts, that he was able to effect the arrangement necessary to enable him to ascend to the window.

When there, a sight was presented to his view that might have appalled the heart and shaken the nerves of a man less broken down by sufferings, both of mind and body, than was the unhappy Raymond. In the midst of the grand square of St. Mark, almost immediately opposite the window where sat the miserable prisoner, was erected a large scaffold, with an open railing all round, and steps for the ascent to it. It was surrounded by a close file of Venetian soldiery armed with

arquebuses and the long battle-axes peculiar to that period, whilst a double line of men, similarly accoutred, kept open a passage through the square to the stairs leading on to the scaffold. With this exception, the entire area of the square was crowded with a dense mass of spectators, and every balcony, every window, and every roof, which commanded a view of the dreadful apparatus of the scaffold, was similarly filled with human beings eager to behold the tragedy now to be enacted. At each angle of the scaffold stood two familiars of the holy inquisition, clothed in black vestments and holding black wands. In the midst of the scaffold, springing from a part of the floor covered with plates of some metal, were fixed two iron stakes, from each of which hung a chain, necessary to secure firmly the wretched criminals who were there to suffer the direst of deaths. Around each stake were piled faggots of wood nearly as high as the stakes themselves.

On one side were placed raised chairs for such officers of state or fathers of the holy inquisition as were to witness the execution; and immediately opposite each pile were placed low seats, on which the condemned might sit and listen to such exhortations from the attendant priests as their dreadful condition demanded. To say that the very soul of the hapless Raymond Delancy sickened at this horrible scene of preparation, is to say little. He clung to the bars of the window, rigid with horror and an almost unendurable suspense. A cold perspiration bathed his forehead, whilst his tongue, parched with feverish agitation, almost clung to the roof of his mouth.

After nearly an hour of torturing suspense, which to the agonized young man seemed like an age of the acutest misery, the terrible drama drew towards its conclusion.

The bell of St. Mark now ceased to sound. The death of an infidel sorcerer could not be sanctified by any passing bell. After a brief space, a loud buzz of voices arose amongst the dense multitude, and the soldiery were seen busily keeping back the eager crowd that closely pressed against each side of the open avenue, which it was their duty to keep clear. Presently was seen going in procession to the scaffold the aged Cardinal di Santa Croce, surrounded by some of the principal secular officials of the Republic, and various

priests in their official costumes, together with a few bodyguards of the cardinal. Ascending the scaffold, the cardinal and his companions took their seats on the raised chairs prepared for them; and the impatience of the fanatic crowd for the terrible tragedy which had drawn them thither became audible in an increase of exclamations and murmurs, and calls for every one to uncover his head, in order that there might be no impediments to their view of the scaffold. Nor was their impatience too severely tried.

Within a few brief minutes after the arrival of the first cortège, another and a sadder procession followed. First came some of the officials of the holy inquisition. They were followed by four executioners clad in black, and with black skull-caps fitting close to their heads, adding to the ghastliness of their sallow and savage countenances. Two of these bore torches in their hands. Behind these, each attended by two priests, and clad in the yellow garments in which those condemned for heresy were wont to be clad when executed, followed the stern Ludolfo, and the wretched wife of Raymond, the companion of his fate. They were followed by a select guard with swords and javelins, commanded by one of the principal officers of the Venetian *sbirri*, or police, who brought up the rear, bearing in his hand a naked sword of antique workmanship, indicative of the prisoners being now delivered over to the secular power. The male prisoner retained the calm and stern expression which characterized him. The unfortunate but still beauteous Esperance, who was of an ashy paleness, trembled violently as she walked, and only kept her feet by being supported on each side.

The sickness of the heart which at once struck down the faculties of the unhappy Raymond when he beheld this piteous spectacle may be conceived by a strong fancy, but cannot in words be described. He felt that a scene was now to be enacted upon which he could not bear to look, and yet from which he had no power to withdraw his eyes. If, when he felt his soul sink within him, he momentarily shut his eyes, a terrible fascination compelled him immediately to reopen them. Would the iron bars have permitted it, he

felt an irresistible impulse to throw himself from the window at once, and so end life and agony together. But this was impossible; and as his blood curdled at the shocking spectacle now going on, and his heart froze with horror, whilst he only breathed with convulsive gasps, and felt a mortal faintness besetting him as the scene went on, there he was compelled to remain, clinging to that window, every gaze from which struck through his heart as with a venomed knife.

As soon as the melancholy cortège had ascended the scaffold, the two prisoners were seated in two low chairs, placed near the stakes and facing each other. Whilst in this position their sentence was finally read to them, and the attendant priests delivered a last exhortation to them to confess their crimes and recant the errors of which they had been guilty. To the unhappy Validè life was lastly offered, on condition that she kissed the sacred cross which the priest held before her, and consented to be instructed in the benign and saving truths of Christianity. During the whole of this awful passage the eyes of Ludolfo were fixed upon the fainting Esperance with a gaze which seemed to say, "Persevere, and our trial will now be over." Its potency was complete. In spite of the dreadful apparatus of death with which she was surrounded, and the hoarse denunciations and clamours of the ferocious and fanatic crowd by which the fatal scaffold was surrounded, the hapless girl spoke no word, but gazed at intervals, as she felt strength to lift her eyelids, upon the eyes of the impassive, calm, and terribly determined Ludolfo.

At length, on a signal, the executioners in black stepped forward; and amid the harsh acclamation and hoarse murmur of the stony crowd that pressed eagerly forward to witness their agony, began to prepare to chain them to the stake destined for each. At this moment Ludolfo, with beseeching gesture, motioned to the executioners to allow him to embrace the shuddering girl, whose senses seemed now to be departing. The executioners looked at the cardinal, and on a motion of assent from the aged priest, led her forward to her heroic companion. He pressed her to his bosom closely for a few moments, and then kissed her. In one moment after joining his lips to hers, he fell backward on his seat; and the fragile

form of the beautiful Esperance was lifeless at his feet. At first, it was thought they had fainted, in this the bitterest crisis of their long agony: but from both life was gone. A few thin fragments of glass, found in the mouth of each, indicated that the Italian had concealed in the mouth some swift and subtle poison, which bore both in a moment far away from the severity of justice and the fell cruelties of persecution under the name of a religion of peace.

It might have been thought that the fierceness of retribution and the remorselessness of a fell bigotry might have softened and relented at the sight of this catastrophe, but nothing is so cruel as superstition. Amidst the shouts and execrations of the tiger-like rabble disappointed of their enjoyment, the lifeless bodies were chained to the stake, and the torch applied to the faggots which were heaped around them. But ere the beautiful frame of his virgin and beloved Validè had disappeared in smoke and ashes, the miserable husband lay, devoid of sense, on the stone floor below the window, from which he had dropped, overcome by the horror of the tragedy.

* * * * *

It was not until he had lain many days in the delirium of fever that the unfortunate Raymond Delancy was recovered to a consciousness of his situation. When his senses began to return, he found himself in a part of the prison far removed from the dungeon which he had occupied, in a larger and cooler apartment, and surrounded with such comforts as his invalid state demanded. He had two attendants. One of them was dressed as one of those sisters of mercy who at that time abounded in the great trading city of Venice, where objects demanding their care were so frequently to be found amongst the adventurers who crowded that emporium of the commerce of Europe and Asia. The other was an aged ecclesiastic, whose silvery white locks lay thinly curled upon his shoulders, and who attended at intervals, to see that the benevolent sister administered the proper medicines, and such light and simple food as the physician permitted the exhausted patient to taste. As soon as recollection began to be restored to the object of his care, the benevolent priest informed him by whispers and significant signs, that con-

versation was at that time forbidden, but that in due time he would be informed of all he wished to know; and that in the meantime he was to keep himself at ease as to his safety and future destination.

With these injunctions, the young man, reduced by bodily and mental suffering to the extreme of debility, was fain to comply; and as his strength gradually returned, had recourse to such books, chiefly of a religious cast, as his venerable attendant supplied, to beguile the tedious hours of his slow and painful convalescence. Thus the days wore on: and as strength gradually returned, and the patient was able to sit up in or upon his bed, propped by pillows, his kind attendants began, by degrees, to converse with him, and to answer such inquiries as he ventured to make. One day, having ventured to name the topic of his future destiny, and his natural anxiety regarding it to his aged attendant,—

“In a few days, signor,” said the venerable priest, “you shall know all that it imports you to know. In the meantime, be content, and thank that all-merciful Being,” here the venerable old man reverently crossed himself, “who has seen fit to raise up for you protectors, able and willing to ward from you those dangers you have had too much reason to apprehend.” To this kindly advice Raymond could not demur, and as something resembling tranquillity returned to him with his returning strength and health, he was willing patiently to wait for the information he could not but anxiously desire to have. It was soon to be afforded him.

One evening after sunset, he was reclining upon his couch, with his newly lighted lamp on a small table beside him, when the aged ecclesiastic entered the apartment, followed by another, whose hood was drawn so closely as to conceal his features from the startled Delancy. The elder, having asked him a few questions as usual as to his health, and placed a chair for his companion, to whom he made a low obeisance, left the room: on which the stranger throwing back his cowl, discovered to the amazed and agitated Raymond, the beautifully expressive but deeply pensive features of the Princess di Santa Croce.

“Raymond Delancy,” she said, softly, but with that sweet

firmness which she knew so well how to assume, "calm yourself. It is my request; and listen to the few brief words I am now permitted to address to you."

The young man, almost fainting with emotion, attempted a reply; but his tongue refused its office. It was inarticulate.

"Your life is safe, Raymond," continued the princess, "and so is that of your father; and your liberty is also accorded to you, on condition that you both quit, without delay, the Venetian territories, and engage never to serve against the Republic."

The young man bowed acquiescence, and would have again essayed to speak, but the princess motioned him to be silent.

"You are permitted," she went on, "to take with you such valuables and other effects as you may be possessed of, which are at present under the seal of the Republic. Tomorrow you will meet your father, and be conveyed with him under safe conduct, to any part of the Venetian frontier that you may select."

Raymond again attempted to speak, and the name of the Countess Luchesini escaped his lips.

"She," replied the princess kindly, "is, I trust, well, and likely to enjoy many years of contented and resigned seclusion in the Ursuline convent near Vicenza, where she is permitted to retire: and now, Raymond Delancy, this interview must end; for one word more can only pass between us on this side the grave, but ere I say it, accept this;" and with these words the princess again drew from her finger the ring which she had formerly given him, and presented it to him, and as she did so, he perceived a tear steal down the pale marble of her cheek, which she hastily brushed away.

The young man, now in extreme agitation, grasped the cold and tremulous fingers of that beauteous hand, for he could no longer restrain his violent emotion. The recollection of the past was too stinging painful to be suppressed. The tears coursed each other down his thin cheeks, and as he spoke, sobs interrupted his utterance.

"Guardian angel!" at last he exclaimed; "and is the last ray of comfort I am destined to behold in this world thus to be extinguished? Unworthy as I am, is there no capacity,

however humble,—however lowly,—however degraded, in which I might wear out my worthless life in your service?"

The princess, with an effort, gently disengaged herself. "Raymond," she said, in a faltering voice, "contend no longer with destiny! The word I now utter can only be uttered once, and that for ever! Farewell! and know that she who now says it is the wife of the Marquis Spinelli!"

POSTSCRIPT.

A FEW brief words alone are necessary to conclude this sad history. On leaving the Venetian Republic, it appears that the unfortunate Baron Delancy, and his still more ill-fated son, retired to Genoa, into the service of which they entered. The Baron Delancy, however, worn out by chagrin and bitter recollections, gradually drooped, and after two years died. His son, now the Baron Delancy, wearied of the world, which had no longer any attractions for him, sold his effects, and finally retired to a convent in Piedmont, at the foot of the Alps. In this seclusion he passed the remainder of his life, and occupied a portion of his time in writing the wild and melancholy story from which the foregoing has been constructed.

He, it appears, had solaced his retirement with the hope that his family would at length regain their estates, and that the progress of the Reformation would be stayed. In this event, he had left directions to his monastic brethren that the MS. relating the fates of the eldest branch of the Delancys should be sent to England for the satisfaction of their successors. In this idea Raymond Delancy was mistaken. The Reformation prevailed; and the estates of the Delancy family passed to a distant branch, who had acquiesced in the new doctrine and new order of things under the Stuarts. As years rolled on, Delancy and his manuscript were forgotten by the inmates of the Alpine monastery. At last it happened that an English gentleman, travelling in Piedmont, was compelled by a violent storm of snow to become for some weeks a guest of the hospitable fathers, and by mere accident to become aware of the existence of the MSS. of the ill-starred Raymond Delancy. By the good fathers he was readily allowed to transcribe them; and from the materials so obtained the foregoing tale has been constructed, with such differences of style and treatment as the taste of the nineteenth century required at the editor's hands.

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